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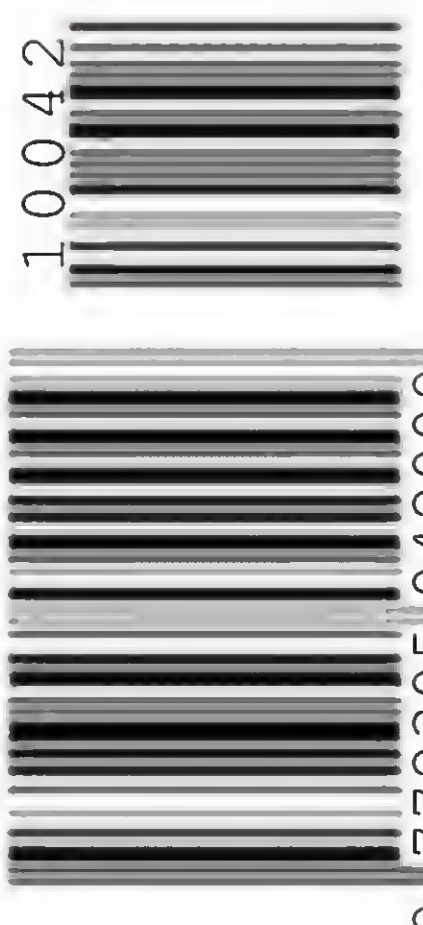


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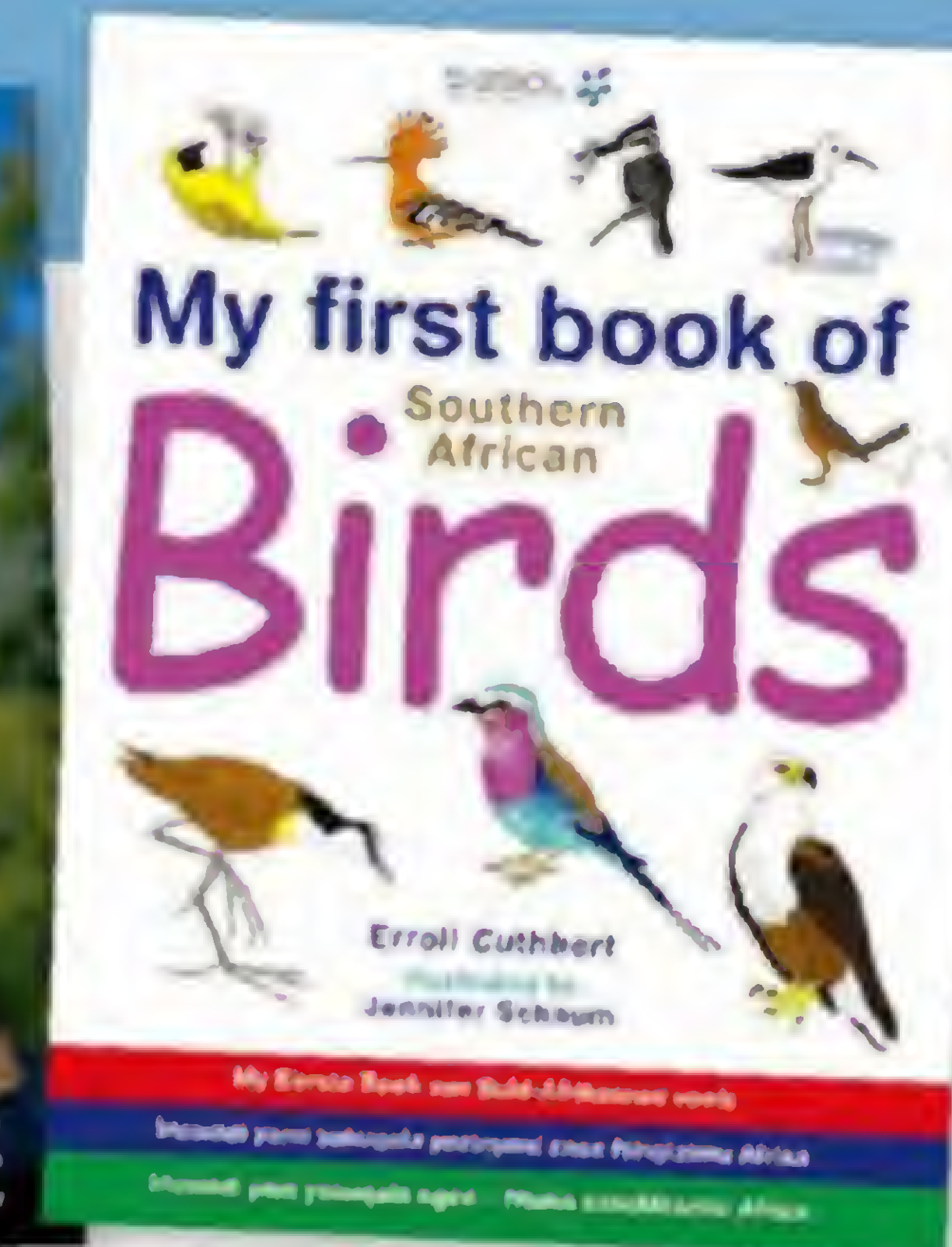
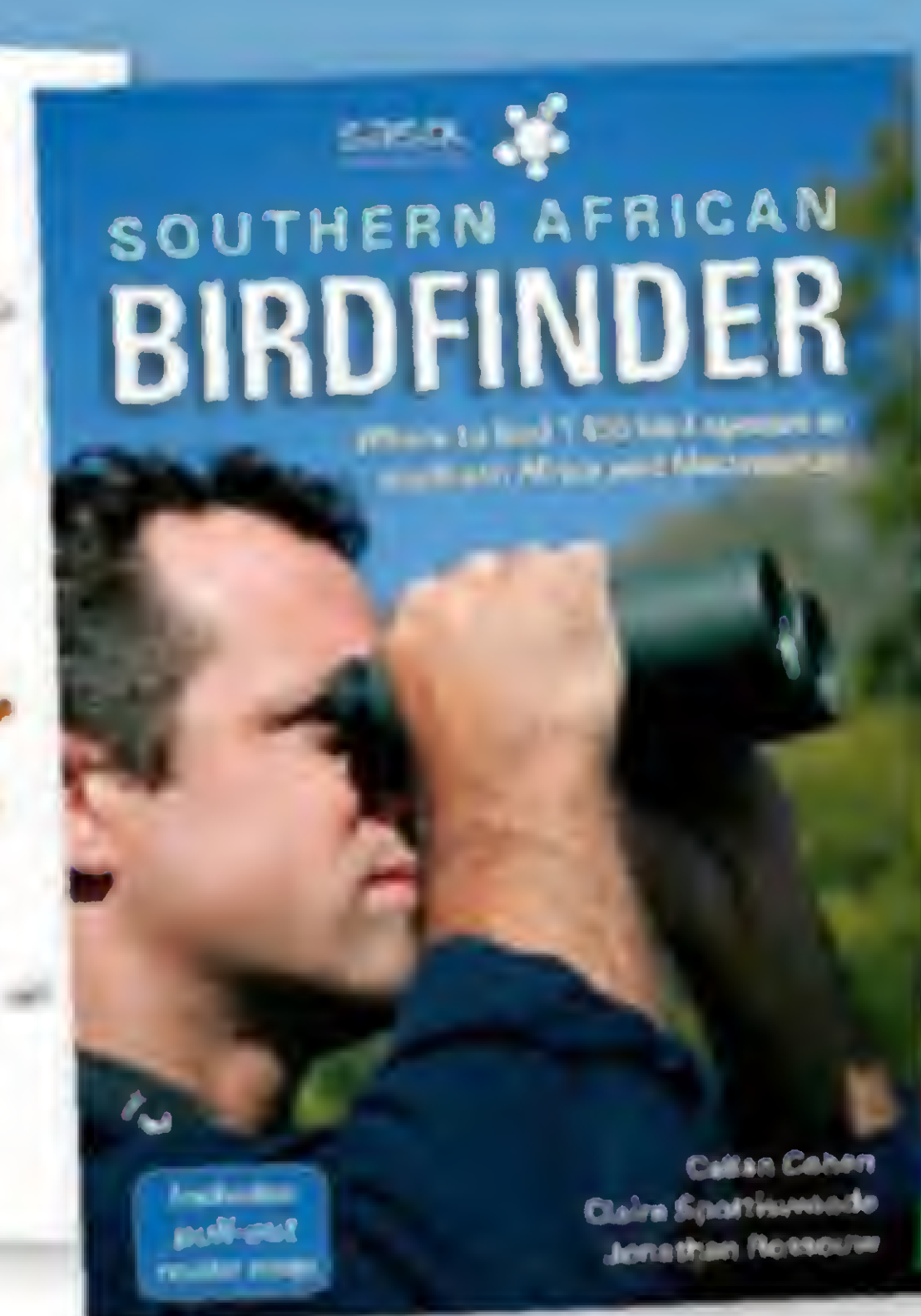
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AFRICAN BIRDLIFE

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THE TIME IS **now**

governance is sound and that our financial administration is beyond reproach. We also have volunteers who assist in our library and with our membership work and who help at events such as The African Bird Fair.

More than 1000 citizen scientists contribute records to the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) and these crucial data advise conservation decisions. The SABAP2 data were of immense value when BirdLife South Africa revised *The 2015 Eskom Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland* and the *Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas of South Africa* directory.

We also benefit from collaborations with other like-minded organisations, for instance WWF-SA and Conservation Outcomes, the association we have with academic institutions such as the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology and through our positive relationship with government departments, especially the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries.

There's so much that can be achieved by working collectively, yet as individuals too we can do a lot to help conserve the natural environment and South Africa's birdlife... Pick up litter when you go out for a walk and recycle household waste. Study the Bird of the Year lesson plans, print out the fact sheets and infographics and make other people aware of each year's chosen bird. Give a gift membership to celebrate a special occasion – the recipient will be reminded of your generosity on six occasions when they receive their copies of *African Birdlife* magazine. For an additional R2800 a year, you can become a BirdLife South Africa's Conservation League donor; we issue tax certificates, so your donation would be tax deductible. Invite a



MARK D. ANDERSON

Well known now for its physical presence across South Africa, but will the Helmeted Guineafowl be recognised by future generations only from images?

friend to accompany you on your next birding trip and introduce them to the captivating world of birds.

No matter how small, all contributions to the conservation of the country's precious natural heritage and to BirdLife South Africa's work are appreciated and valuable. Together we can make a positive difference.

Mark D. Anderson
Chief Executive Officer



NEW!

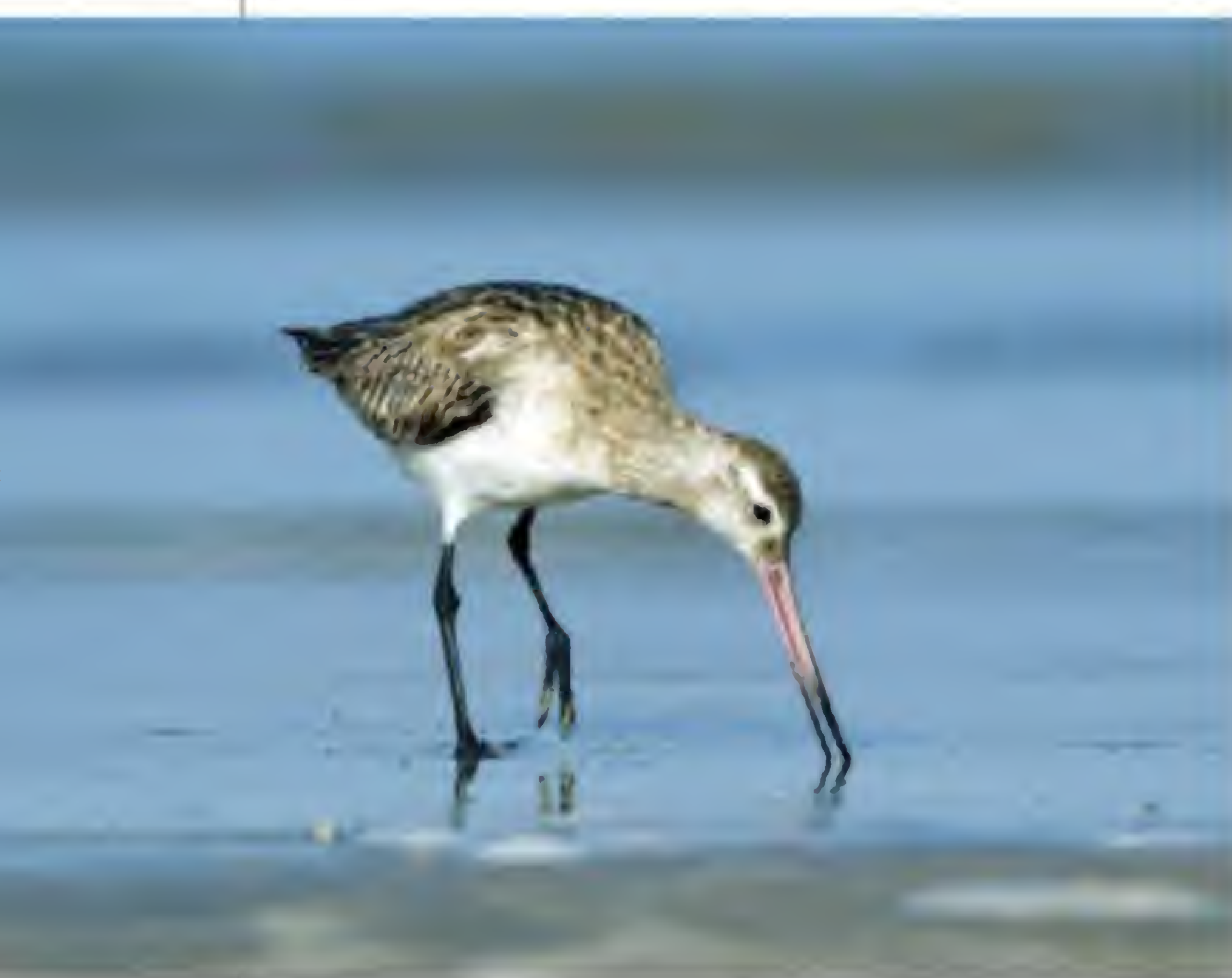
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inbox

We'd like to hear from you, and you are welcome to send us your birding questions, observations or sightings for inclusion in these pages. Accompanying images should be sent as high-res jpgs (ie at 300 dpi) and be between 1 and 3MB in size. Send your contributions to editor@birdlife.org.za. Letters may be edited for clarity or length. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the policies of BirdLife South Africa.



BAR-TAILED GODWIT PETER RYAN

GOOD GODWITS

The 'Sightings in the Subregion' feature in the May/June 2019 issue of the magazine mentions a Black-tailed Godwit being seen at Marievale, near Nigel on Gauteng's East Rand, but without further comment. I couldn't help but remember the Bar-tailed Godwit that spent several weeks at the Korsman Bird Sanctuary in nearby Benoni, which attracted birders from far afield, as discussed in an article in the January/February 2019 issue.



LOVE, NATURALLY

While hiking at Olifantsbos in Cape Point Nature Reserve, I saw two Malachite Sunbirds flying around a bush. After a few minutes I noticed that the male had perched on top of the bush, while the female was flying around, landing now and then and singing. Judging by the male's extravagant movements and as his yellow pectoral tufts were on full display, he was clearly intent on wooing his mate. I was lucky to get a few photographs.

DANIE TERBLANCHE
SOMERSET WEST, WESTERN CAPE

As the Black-tailed has fewer numbers than the Bar-tailed (an estimated 600 000–800 000 as opposed to just more than a million) and is also not generally to be found farther south than West and Central Africa, I wondered why it seems to have drawn far less attention.

Also, what is it about two almost neighbouring mini-wetland sanctuaries on the East Rand that would attract these related northern hemisphere migrants more than other similar places in South Africa?

NICK COWLEY
JOHANNESBURG, GAUTENG

Trevor Hardaker responds: The Bar-tailed Godwit is a regular summer visitor to southern Africa, but it tends to be restricted mostly to coastal wetlands with hardly any individuals being recorded on inland water bodies. Black-tailed Godwit, on the other hand, is a vagrant to the subregion, with only a

handful reaching southern Africa every year (and most of those are right in the north of the subregion). In addition, the majority of Black-taileds tend to turn up at inland water bodies, and only a few ever make it to coastal wetlands. The fact that the Bar-tailed Godwit at Korsman Bird Sanctuary attracted so much local attention is testament to the fact that most local birders had probably previously seen Black-tailed Godwits in the wider area (there are good numbers of records of this species from Gauteng), but on a local scale Bar-tailed Godwit was a much rarer find and the majority of local birders would probably not have seen one in Gauteng.

As to why these two reserves attracted these two species is anyone's guess. There are a number of wetlands on the Highveld that could be attractive to these species, but perhaps it is more as a result of birder coverage that these two birds were found where they were. Many suitable wetlands in the >

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area may not be easily accessible to the public, they may be in areas of security concern or there may be other reasons that mean that birders are not visiting the areas as regularly and therefore possibly miss seeing unusual birds there.

ROCKY MOMENTS

During a trip to Gauteng's Marievale Bird Sanctuary on 16 June 2019 I began to feel as though I was watching a *Rocky* movie, as I observed a Red-knobbed Coot attacking an African Purple Swampphen. At first I could not make out what the coot was doing. I thought it was simply flapping its wings and cleaning itself, but suddenly a swampphen emerged from beneath the coot. The coot was pecking the swampphen aggressively, stabbing viciously at its head and eyes and repeatedly pushing it under the water, as though trying to drown it. This behaviour continued for about a minute.

When a second coot appeared to join the action, I thought that would be the end of the swampphen. The coot turned to see the incoming bird and as it did so, the swampphen managed to free itself from its grip. In the swampphen's desperate bid to escape its aggressor, it appeared as though it was running on water! When comparing the size of

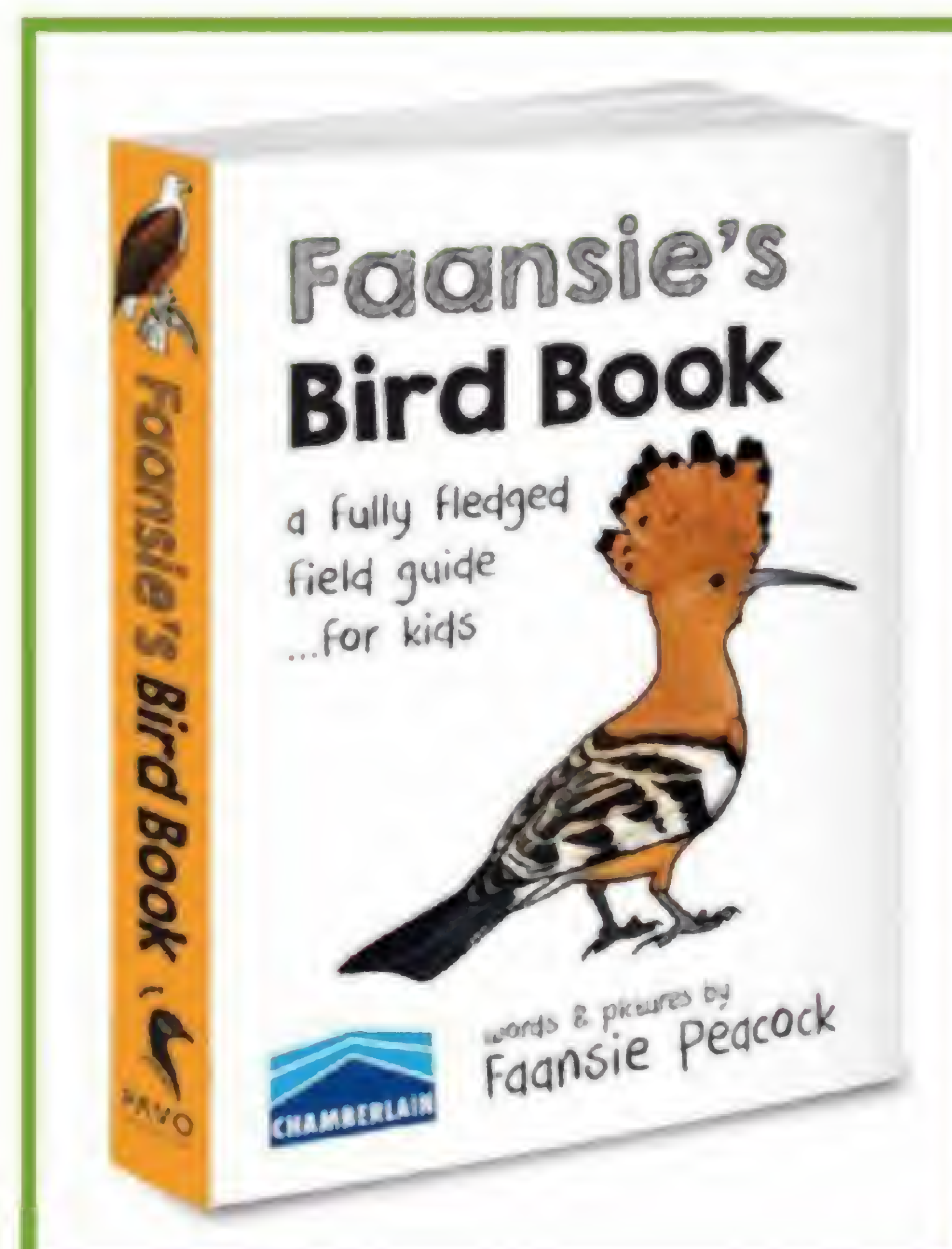


the swampphen to that of the coot, you would think that the swampphen would be able to defend itself. Is it normal for a coot to attack a swampphen in this way?

NICK MATHIOS

SECUNDA, MPUMALANGA

Dr Warwick Tarboton comments: Well done on photographing this extraordinary event. Skirmishes like this usually break off before they become lethal, but in this instance if the coot had continued in this way, the swampphen may have been drowned. One can only surmise what led to this conflict. Swampghens are well-known nest robbers and regularly take eggs or small nestlings from egret nests in heronries. Perhaps this swampphen ventured too close to a pair of coots that had small chicks or the coots had a nest with eggs and recognised the swampphen as a threat. In open water, coots would have the upper hand in a clash like this, given that they are the heavier of the two and that they have superior swimming skills. So this swampphen was probably fortunate to survive; while scuffles like this seldom end in the death of one bird, it does happen. ♦



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Seeing beyond



ALBERT FRONEMAN

By the skin of their non-existent teeth

The genetic revolution provides overwhelming evidence that all living birds belong to one of three main radiations: the Palaeognathae (ratites and tinamous) and two groups of Neognathae – the Galloanseres (ducks and gamebirds) and Neoaves (all other birds; see *African Birdlife* 3(3): 10–11 and 4(4): 14). But there has been much debate about when these groups evolved into the array of birds that we see today.

Initial attempts to date the radiations within these groups based on the rate of genetic evolution suggested that most modern bird orders evolved before the mass extinction event that saw the demise of the dinosaurs some 66 million years ago. This was supported by the assumed Gondwana origin of the large, flightless ratites, given that Gondwana broke up well before the extra-terrestrial impact that triggered the extinction event. However, we've known for some time that ostriches, rheas, cassowaries

The ancestral form of the Grey Go-away-bird had longer legs than the modern version and was probably more at home on the ground.

and the Emu, as well as the extinct moas and elephant birds, evolved their large size and similar appearance independently from flying ancestors (see *African Birdlife* 2(5): 18).

Jacob Berv and Daniel Field (*Systematic Biology* 67: 1–13) provide evidence that the mass extinction event was associated with a marked reduction in bird body size. Because small birds tend to mature more quickly, their generation times are shorter, speeding up the rate at which their genes evolve. Correcting for the effect of body size, the molecular dating tools now suggest that virtually all the radiation of modern birds took place after the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event.

The discovery of an extraordinary diversity of well-preserved fossils in north-eastern China dating back 120–130 million years confirms that the ancestors of modern birds were not the only birds in the Cretaceous period. Among those feathered dinosaurs were fossils of several other bird lineages, such as the diverse Enantiornithes and the aquatic Ichthyornithes and Hesperornithes.

Most Enantiornithes were passerine-like birds that were assumed to be part of the radiation of modern birds, but they have a distinct arrangement of the shoulder bones, indicating that they form a different evolutionary group. The few fossils from the period leading up to the extinction event suggest that the Enantiornithes and most other bird groups probably died out with the dinosaurs.

Daniel Field and colleagues used several lines of evidence to suggest that the mass extinction event was associated with the almost global loss of forest cover (*Current Biology* 28: 1–7). It has long been assumed that the asteroid that struck the Yucatan Peninsula triggered catastrophic fires, but Antoine Bercovici, a palaeobotanist on the paper, showed how the spores of two fern species dominated deposits laid down more than perhaps 1000 years after the impact event right around the world. Ferns often colonise disturbed areas such as recent lava flows and land slips.

The absence of forests for so long could explain the extinction of the dinosaurs and avian groups such as the Enantiornithes. Supporting this contention is the fact that the basal species that survived the impact were all ground-dwelling. The subsequent radiation of birds saw the evolution of arboreal forms as new forests rose from the ashes.

This hypothesis helps to make sense of some of the puzzling relationships seen among seemingly quite different bird orders. It is hard to imagine how turacos can be closely related to bustards, but they form a common group with the cuckoos, which include both arboreal and terrestrial species (such as roadrunners, couas, ground cuckoos). Most tellingly, the earliest fossil turaco had longer legs than any modern species, suggesting that the ancestral form was more at home on the ground than in trees.

We've long known that birds are the only surviving dinosaurs. This recent research suggests it was touch and go that any birds survived the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction.

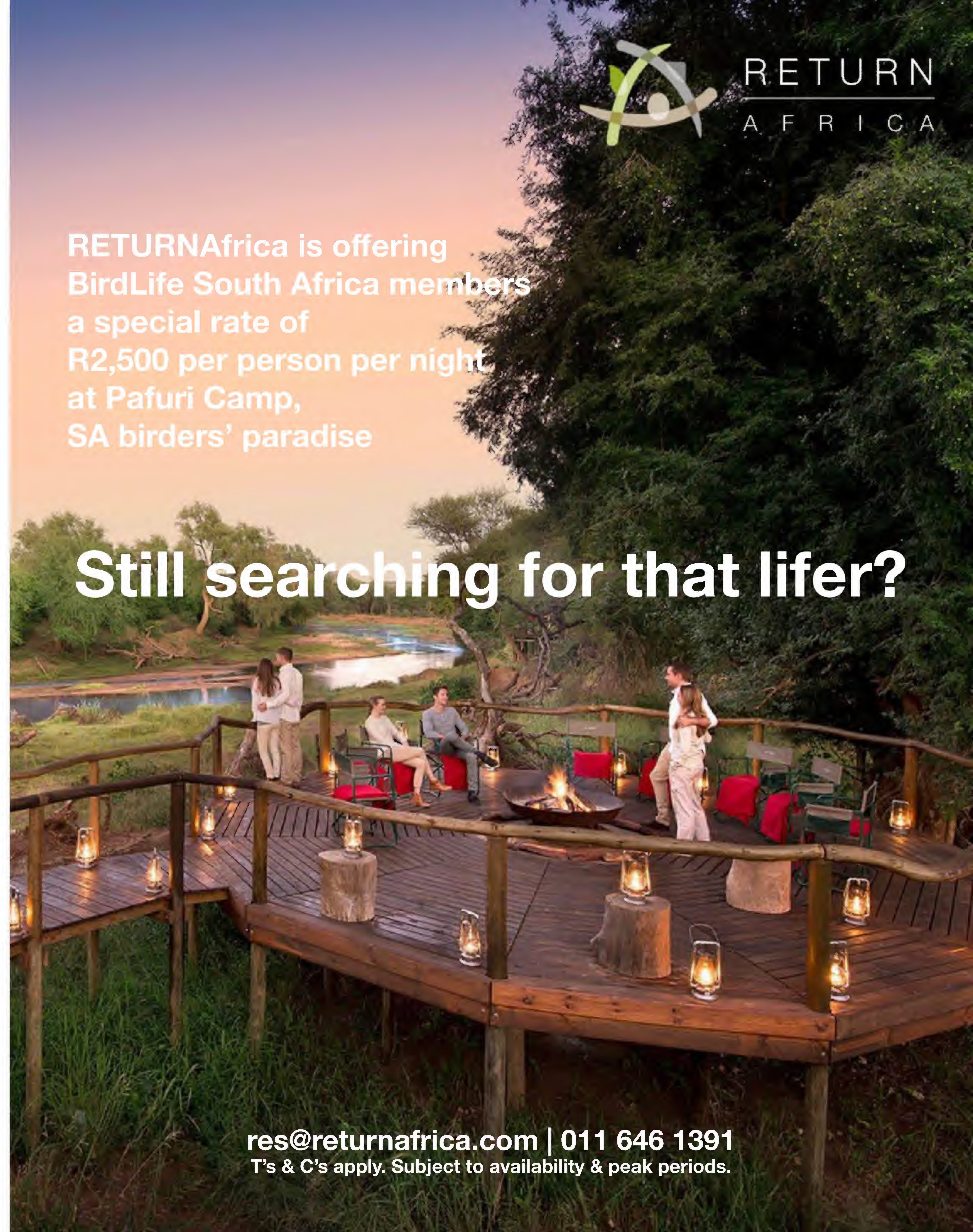
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LESSER FLAMINGO MARK D. ANDERSON

Why do some birds rest on one leg?

Most of us have trouble standing on one leg for a few seconds, let alone for four hours like flamingos reputedly can. Flamingos have balance aids built into their bodies that allow them to stand on one leg with little muscular effort. The stance is so stable that a bird hardly appears to sway while staying upright, even when dozing. But why?

Unipedal roosting is observed in most birds, notably cranes, falcons and herons, more rarely among pigeons and woodpeckers, and almost never for swifts,

cuckoos and albatrosses. Covering the feet and tarsi by roosting on one leg or sitting on the ground can reduce heat loss by as much 50 per cent in avian species. As the bill also helps disperse heat, larger-billed species spend more time in back-rest postures than do smaller-billed species across a wide range of temperatures. Tucking the bill back and within the plumage and standing on one leg occurs more at low ambient temperatures, so these behaviours are also seen more at higher latitudes (that is, they are more likely to be observed in shorebirds on

South Africa's coasts than on Tanzania's). However, these postures may be costly in terms of compromising reaction time to predators and subsequent successful escape and they also limit normal activities such as foraging. Birds are therefore expected to roost in these postures only when thermoregulatory benefits outweigh any costs.

A recent study (Ryeland et al, 2019) found that across a wide range of temperatures species with relatively longer legs more frequently roosted on one leg. Species with shorter legs relied less on this posture to insulate the relatively smaller surface area of the legs, which supports the idea that birds stand on one leg more in colder temperatures. Unipedal resting is also less likely to be observed in heavier birds; instead, these species sit to regulate temperature, thus covering both legs.

According to the study, however, temperature levels did not explain the use of unipedal roosting in species such as Red-necked Avocet, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and Curlew Sandpiper, patterns the authors describe as 'perplexing'. It is therefore possible that other factors may be important in the use of unipedal roosting, such as alleviating biomechanical load associated with large appendages and bodies or the need to minimise energy expenditure. It begs the questions: as the climate warms, will birds need to roost less on one leg, and can you figure out the temperature judging by the number of birds roosting on one leg? Keep watching your local waders to find out.

ALAN LEE

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IN A FLAP

New research reveals that homing pigeons fit in one extra wingbeat per second when flying in pairs, compared to flying solo.

Birds that fly in V-formations, such as geese, are able to conserve energy by flying in aerodynamically optimal positions. By contrast, in species that don't fly in formation, such as homing pigeons, the costs and benefits of flocking have been less well understood.

The research indicates that flying with another bird requires more energy compared to flying solo. 'The results of this study were completely unexpected. Energy is the currency of life, so it's astonishing that the birds are prepared to pay a substantial energetic cost to fly together,' said lead author Dr Lucy Taylor.

The team used high-frequency GPS and accelerometer bio-loggers to measure how pigeons changed their wingbeat patterns when flying in pairs compared to flying solo. The accelerometers act much like fitness trackers but instead of measuring steps, the researchers measure wingbeats. 'The increase in wingbeat frequency is equivalent to Usain Bolt running the 100-metre sprint at his usual speed, while fitting in nearly one extra step per second. The pigeons are flapping faster when flying in pairs, but hardly going any faster,' said Dr Taylor.

The increase in wingbeat frequency is likely to be related to the demands of coordinating flight. Dr Taylor said, 'Imagine trying to coordinate with and avoid hitting another small object travelling at around 44 miles per hour. This is nearly two times faster than an Olympic sprinter and the birds can move up and down as well as left and right. For a pigeon, flapping its wings faster will both give it faster reactions

and greater control over its movements and will help keep its head stable, making it easier to track where the other bird is.'

Despite the energetic costs of fitting in an additional wingbeat per second, the birds consistently chose to fly together, suggesting that they were able to gain other benefits from flocking. Birds flying in a pair were simultaneously able to improve their homing accuracy, meaning that they could conserve energy by flying shorter routes home. This research suggests that, combined with increased predator protection from safety in numbers, the overall benefits of flocking outweigh the immediate energetic costs of changing wingbeat patterns.

SCIENCE DAILY

Reference

- Taylor LA et al. 2019. 'Birds invest wingbeats to keep a steady head and reap the ultimate benefits of flying together.' *PLOS Biology* 17 (6): e3000299 DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.3000299



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Cloud Cisticolas and calcium

Poultry farmers and bird breeders are well aware of the importance of feeding grit to their egg-laying hens in order for them to lay strong-shelled eggs.

The quantity of nutrients needed by a bird to lay its clutch of eggs far exceeds that readily available in its body. Some of these nutrients can be laid down in advance, but calcium needs to be consumed shortly before egg laying, as the quantity needed for normal shell thickness exceeds the storage capacity of the bird. Insufficient calcium in the diet causes thin-shelled eggs that break easily and thus lower breeding success. Females are known to seek out calcium-rich food sources, especially in the evening before laying.

Birds find calcium in many forms, including insects with calcium-rich exoskeletons such as locusts, woodlice, millipedes and various beetles. Raptors and larger birds can utilise bones and for smaller birds even predator scats can be picked over for bits of bone or crab

remains. Snail shells are an excellent – and usually plentiful – source of easily accessible calcium. Some readers might remember that during the mid-20th century acid rain leached calcium from the soils, resulting in (among other things) tree deaths and diminished snail populations in Europe. The resultant decline in bird numbers was brought starkly to the public's attention by Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*. The extensive use (in the United States in particular) of the insecticide DDT also played havoc with breeding birds such as the Bald Eagle, endangered at the time. DDT is an endocrine disruptor that inhibits the absorption of calcium, which also results in thin-shelled eggs and poor skeletal development in chicks.

Besides egg production, calcium and protein are needed by growing chicks, especially in the first two weeks, so the adults maintain the calcium-rich diet during chick rearing, again by supplementing the youngsters' diet with snail shells, animal and fish bones, egg shells,

crab and crayfish shell, and grit, as well as some unusual items such as ash, mortar and whitewash.

While observing and photographing a pair of Cloud Cisticolas *Cisticola textrix textrix* feeding their nestlings near Humansdorp in the Eastern Cape, I recorded a variety of invertebrates brought to the nest. These included grasshoppers, worms, praying mantises, flies, spiders, moths and various bugs. On more than one occasion, however, bits of exoskeleton of long-dead millipedes were brought and fed to the nestlings. This observation was corroborated at a second nest near Swellendam in the Western Cape, where long-dried millipede segments were again supplied to the youngsters. The Cloud Cisticola is an insectivore at all times, but insects (perhaps contrary to what one would expect) do not provide sufficient calcium for good skeletal and feather development of the chicks.

Although feeding non-living items to nestlings is not uncommon in various species, the provisioning of millipede exoskeletons by the Cloud Cisticola parents was nonetheless an interesting observation, as it was obviously not just a single event but repeated behaviour.

JESSIE WALTON



JESSIE WALTON (4)



above Housekeeping is done meticulously – the faecal sac is removed and dropped well away from the nest.

left The very well-hidden nest on the ground housed two well-grown chicks.

opposite, above The colourful Cape spittlebug *Rhinaulax analis* was a regular titbit.

opposite, below A Cloud Cisticola bringing bits of dried millipede to the nest. The barbed wire gives a sense of scale to this busy little bird.

on the shelf

A GUIDE TO THE DRAGONFLIES & DAMSELFLIES OF SOUTH AFRICA

Warwick and Michèle Tarboton

Struik Nature
ISBN 9781775847007
Softcover, 224 pages; R310

The new edition of this well-known title maintains the same high standard to which we have become accustomed in the previous editions. An A5-sized book of just more than 220 pages, the overall impression is of a well-laid out and impressively illustrated work in standard field guide format.

The book begins with a thorough introduction to the subject, covering items such as the classification of dragonflies and damselflies, their life cycle and expectancy, seasonality, feeding, predators and parasites and sexual dimorphism. There is also a general discussion about identification, highlighting the various features that should be looked for in the field when trying to identify these critters.

It then moves into the species accounts, dealing first with the damselflies before tackling the dragonflies. Both groups start with a family page where the basic taxonomic relationships are explained and grouped, which helps to explain how certain species are related.

Each of the 164 species currently known to occur in South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland is then discussed in detail under three main headings: size (where all necessary measurements are given), occurrence (an explanation of the distribution of the species, the original location where it was described, seasonality, status and habitat preferences) and identification (salient features for each species). Each species account is also accompanied by an easy-to-read distribution map, excellent photographs and scans of the insects (both close-up and side views).

Additional information in the book includes clearly presented illustrations of both dragonfly and damselfly morphology, illustrations of a range of their larvae, a comprehensive glossary and a list of further reading, which

also contains websites and social media pages/groups.

Improvements to this edition incorporate new distribution maps, more annotations on the illustrations showing key features and additional colour plates and photographs.

For anyone with an interest in this group of insects or even in general biodiversity, this is an excellent addition to your library and I would highly recommend it. The layout is attractive and the many photographs and illustrations are bound to appeal to even the most inexperienced dragon- and damselfliers. I look forward to putting it to the test in the field.

TREVOR HARDAKER



Struik Nature

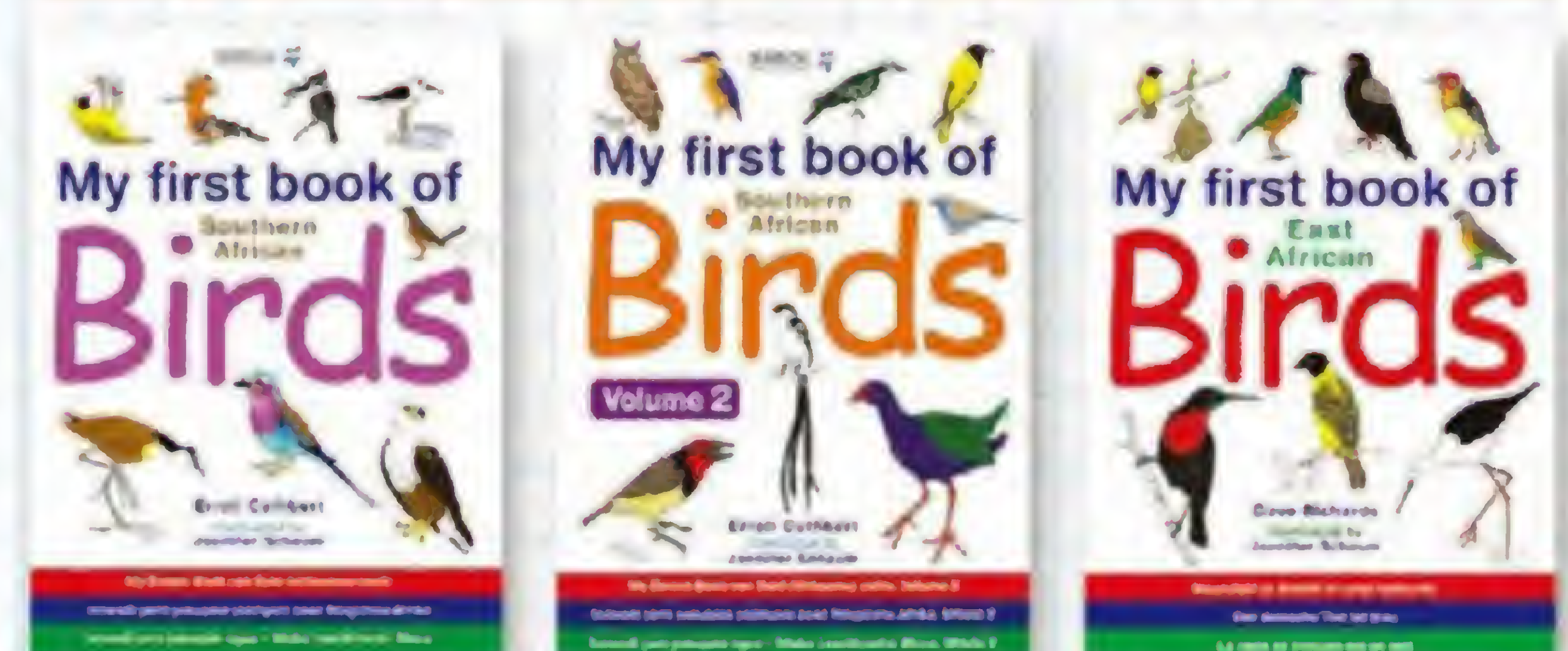
Checklist to essential guides and apps



POCKET GUIDES



FOR KIDS



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tag team

Using satellite tags to understand wildlife crime

Although we are called the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, our research does extend beyond the African continent. This was recently the case when Natural England, the statutory conservation agency in England, asked us to help analyse their satellite-tag data from one of the UK's rarest raptors, the Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*.

Some readers may not be familiar with this species, as only the occasional vagrant reaches North Africa. However, in the UK the Hen Harrier is infamous as the most persecuted species in the country. The species is at the centre of a human-wildlife conflict between conservationists and managers of land used for the recreational shooting of Red Grouse.

In the UK, vast areas of the uplands, the so-called 'grouse moors', are managed for driven grouse shooting. The grouse are flushed by beaters towards shooting 'butts', where they are shot in large numbers. Driven grouse shooting requires very large populations of Red Grouse – often more than 200 birds per square kilometre. To achieve these densities, grouse moors are intensively managed and wild predators are killed in order to increase grouse numbers. The extermination of many predators, such as foxes, stoats, weasels and crows, is legally permitted; however, the illegal killing of raptors and other protected species is also thought to be widespread on many grouse moors.

The Hen Harrier is one such protected species. Its diet consists mainly of small mammals and birds, but it also preys on grouse chicks and in some circumstances can reduce the number of grouse available to be shot.

Within the UK, the status of the Hen Harrier in England is particularly worrying. Based on the available habitat,



RICHARD SAUNDERS

England should support some 300 pairs of Hen Harriers, but in the past decade only a handful of pairs have bred each year. The illegal killing of the species by people associated with grouse moor management has long been thought to limit its population size. However, identifying the scale of these crimes and their impact on harrier populations has been difficult because they occur in remote areas and evidence is likely to be destroyed. As a result, successful prosecutions are rare.

In 2007, Natural England started fitting Hen Harrier fledglings with satellite transmitters. Their aim was to better understand why numbers remain so low and to establish whether the illegal killing of the species could be responsible for this pattern. Between 2007 and 2017, 60 young harriers were fitted with transmitters. Together with Professor Steve Redpath and other colleagues in the UK, we analysed these data to explore whether patterns of their deaths and disappearance were linked to areas of land managed for driven grouse shooting.

Our study, recently published in *Nature Communications* (doi:10.1038/s41467-019-09044-w), showed that the likelihood of tagged harriers dying or disappearing was 10 times higher within areas managed for grouse shooting than in other areas. This pattern also applied to protected areas, with those containing more grouse moors having

The Hen Harrier, sometimes called the 'skydancer' because of its amazing acrobatic breeding display, is one of the UK's rarest birds.

the highest likelihood of harriers dying or disappearing.

We estimated that 72 per cent of tagged harriers were likely to have been killed illegally, meaning that first-year survival of these tagged harriers was exceptionally low (17 per cent) compared with harriers from other areas (36 to 54 per cent). While dead harriers can be disposed of, the pattern of their disappearance revealed by the tracking data could not be hidden. All analyses led to the same conclusion: Hen Harriers in England suffer elevated levels of mortality on grouse moors and this is most likely as a result of illegal killing.

Our study shows just how widespread illegal killing is on grouse moors and that the species is not safe even within protected areas. The study also reveals that satellite tags can be useful to quantify levels of wildlife crime. Their use in this way is likely to increase and we are pleased to have contributed to the advancement of the field.

MEGAN MURGATROYD AND ARJUN AMAR

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cryptic conundrum

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Send your entries by e-mail to editor@birdlife.org.za (with 'Quiz' in the subject line). Remember to include your full contact details, including your street address and telephone number. *Note that multiple electronic entries will be deleted.* Entries close on Friday, 25 October 2019; the judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. The winner's name and the solution will be published in the January/February 2020 issue of *African Birdlife*.



AND THE ANSWER IS...

Solution to the Cryptic Conundrum that appeared in the May/June 2019 issue.

This is clearly a seabird. The long, pointed wings and hint of raised nostrils indicate a member of the tubenoses, the Procellariiformes, which include albatrosses, petrels and two families of storm petrels. Even without a clear size reference, the bill structure is wrong for an albatross and the wings are much too long and slender for a storm petrel, so we're dealing with a member of the petrel family, Procellariidae. The long, slender bill is typical of a shearwater. Until recently, only two genera were recognised: the Cory's–Streaked Shearwater group in *Calonectris* and all other species in *Puffinus*. However, genetic work has shown that the small, predominantly black and white *Puffinus* shearwaters form a separate radiation from the larger species, which are now placed in *Ardenna*. This bird belongs to the former group, a notoriously complex genus to identify and one that has been made more difficult by the splitting of several species. The bill is too long for a Little or Subantarctic Shearwater or even for a Tropical Shearwater. The clean white underparts, broad black trailing edge to the wing and the dark face with the hint of a pale 'C' behind the ear coverts all point to it being a **Manx Shearwater *P. puffinus***.

Congratulations to the winner, Trevor Charters of Midrand, Gauteng.





Citrine Wagtail,
KwaZulu-Natal

DARYL DELL

sightings

IN THE SUBREGION

Mid-May to mid-July 2019

HEADLINE NEWS

Although the midwinter review period was, not unexpectedly, particularly quiet, there was still a handful of first-rate birds that surfaced to keep twitchers entertained.

The shining star was undoubtedly southern Africa's ninth Citrine Wagtail that was found at Pongola Nature Reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal. It spent just five days there, but during that time drew many twitchers from across the region.

The region's first record of the Citrine Wagtail was in April 1998, when one was seen at the Gamtoos River mouth near Port Elizabeth. More than a decade passed before the next one was recorded in April 2009 at Kleinmond Sewage Works in the Western Cape. This was followed by birds in May 2014 at the Urikaruus waterhole in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park; in April 2015 at Strandfontein Sewage Works; two different individuals in April 2017 at Rossmund Golf Course

in Swakopmund and on a farm near Melmoth; in August 2017 at Tankatara Salt Pans near Colchester; and most recently in April 2018 at Cape Recife in Port Elizabeth.

A few other headline birds were noted: southern Africa's 30th Eurasian Blackcap turned up in a garden in Simon's Town; an immature Northern Rockhopper Penguin came ashore at Cefani beach near East London; and the Yellow-throated Leaf-loves remained in the gardens of the Caprivi Houseboat Safari Lodge in Katima Mulilo, Namibia.

COASTAL AND SEABIRDS

Pelagic trips out of the Cape produced some birds worth mentioning, including Wandering Albatross and Northern and Southern royal albatrosses, Southern Fulmar and Slender-billed Prion. Southern Royal Albatross and Spectacled Petrel were seen during an observer trip about 120 nautical miles west of Hondeklip Bay.

Elsewhere, it was just the pirates of the sky that were reported, with Lesser Frigatebirds noted at Cape Vidal, St Lucia estuary and Richards Bay and a solitary Greater Frigatebird reported from Rio Azul, south of Rio Save in Mozambique.

WINTER WADERS

Given that it was the middle of winter, it was not surprising that the reports of waders would be minimal. The only birds of note recorded during the period were singletons of both Red and Red-necked phalaropes at Walvis Bay Salt Works, another Red-necked Phalarope in Velddrif and a Eurasian Oystercatcher that turned up in Maputo Bay, Mozambique.

THE BEST OF THE REST

For some reason, there was a minor irruption of Grey Wagtails: in the Western Cape one was recorded near Napier, while in the Eastern Cape three individuals were seen – at Despatch and at Target Kloof in Port Elizabeth (different birds) and another at Kariega Private Game Reserve. The only other species of note was a male Western Marsh Harrier, which was reported at Kwetsani camp in the Okavango, Botswana.

TREVOR HARDAKER

None of the records included here has been adjudicated by any of the subregion's Rarities Committees.



Southern Fulmar, Cape pelagic

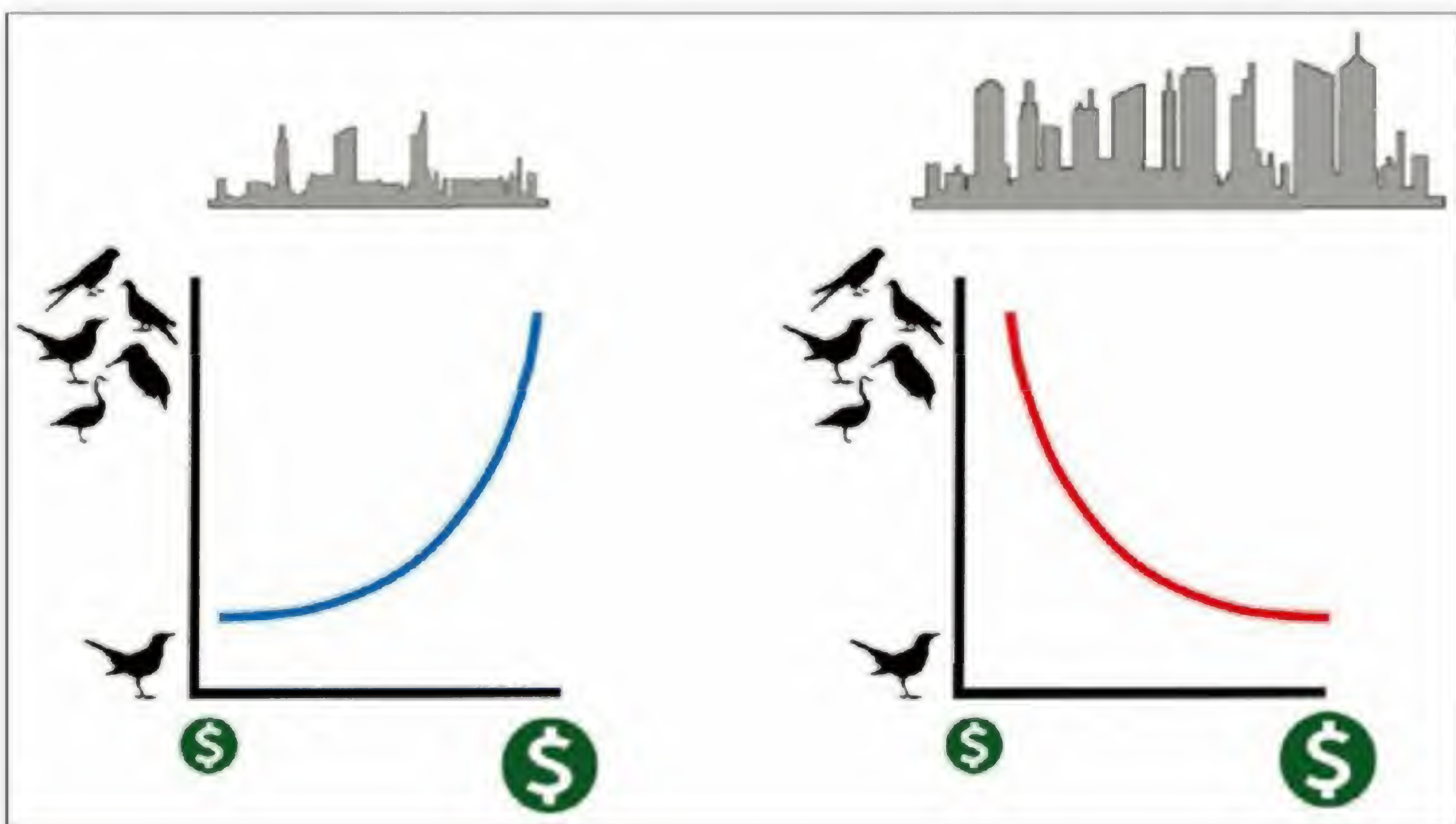
TREVOR HARDAKER

cities' limits

Urbanisation represents one of the most severe and irreversible forms of human impact on the planet. The expansion of urban infrastructure generally has negative consequences for biodiversity. However, within urban areas there is evidence that biodiversity correlates with improved socio-economic status. This has been termed the 'luxury effect', which suggests that in urban landscapes specifically, areas of greater wealth have relatively enhanced biodiversity compared to poorer ones.

The 'luxury effect' is well documented for single large cities within developed countries. However, no studies have considered animal biodiversity in relation to socio-economic gradients in Africa, despite it having the highest levels of people living in poverty. This led a team of researchers from the University of Turin and the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology to undertake the first ever analysis of the 'luxury effect' for African cityscapes. The researchers made use of the second South African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) to determine bird species richness across 22 metropolitan areas in South Africa. The incredible spatial coverage of SABAP2, in combination with income data derived from the South African National Population Census and remotely sensed data on urban land cover, allowed for an in-depth analysis of how bird diversity changes in relation to socio-economic status and urban development at a national level.

The study, published recently in *Global Change Biology* (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/gcb.14682>), was based on four years of SABAP2 data that were carefully chosen to match the temporal range of both the urban land cover and census data. A rigorous analysis allowed the researchers to accurately



CHEVONNE REYNOLDS

By analysing the relationship between bird species richness and income level of urban dwellers in South Africa, we tested the 'luxury effect', which posits a positive correlation between wealth and biodiversity. We found that the relationship between species richness and income differed across an urbanisation gradient. The 'luxury effect' was evident in areas of lower urbanisation, while the opposite pattern was found in more urbanised areas.

determine species richness per pentad and to test how this richness varied in relation to the median annual household income and percentage cover of urban infrastructure in the same pentad. The result was clear: for relatively low-density urban landscapes in South Africa, rich areas have a greater diversity of bird species than poor areas. Critically, the researchers were able to show that as landscapes become more urbanised, bird diversity of rich areas declines. This suggests that improving the socio-economic status of the poorer inhabitants of South Africa's cities will initially present a win-win for biodiversity and human well-being, but that there is a threshold of urban development beyond which biodiversity starts to decrease. The research suggests that maintaining green spaces in at least an equal proportion to the built environment is likely to provide a development strategy that will enhance urban biodiversity and bring with it lifestyle benefits for urban dwellers.

Once again, SABAP2 has provided researchers with critical data to tackle

novel, broad-scale questions that are relevant for policymakers. Even though pentad-level data could be considered relatively coarse grained for the usually short gradients associated with studies of urban landscapes, the SABAP2 data proved invaluable in providing a first glance into urban sustainability challenges in the developing world. Thanks to the outstanding efforts of the SABAP2 citizen scientists, this research forms a key contribution to a wider strategy to expand urban settlements in a sustainable way to provide for the growing urban population in South Africa, including addressing imbalances in environmental justice.



stealing the COMMON

The previous article in this series (July/August 2019) reviewed the overtly distressing dangers to Secretarybirds, such as poorly maintained fences and poisoning and wanton destruction at nests. But there are far more pervasive processes that are probably wreaking significantly greater long-term ruin on this bird at the population level. The opening stanza of a 17th-century folk poem encapsulates it best: 'The law locks up the man or woman, who steals the goose off the common, but leaves the greater villain loose, who steals the common from the goose.'

So how is the Secretarybird doing in the 'common' provided by the 30-odd African countries in which it resides? The answer is that we really don't know, as there is little to no 'hard' information from most of these countries regarding changes in distribution or numbers. Publicising records of dead Secretarybirds found along fences or under overhead lines is easy compared to the greater challenge of assessing population trends in this species across its broad Afrotropical range. But the knowledge that is to hand is not reassuring.

In South Africa, a comparison between the results of two bird-atlas projects revealed that reporting rates decreased by 73 per cent between 1987–1992 and 2007–2013. Even more worrying, one of the places where this decrease was particularly evident was in the Kruger Park, South Africa's largest protected area. In Botswana, a comparison of road counts made between 1991 and 1995 and between 2015 and 2016 suggested a 78 per cent decrease in Secretarybird numbers. As in South Africa, this decrease occurred across both protected and unprotected areas. The Namibian red data book also suggests a reduction in numbers in what were previously major strongholds in that country, including several national

parks. The conclusions here are obvious. Secretarybirds in these countries are fast disappearing and we cannot complacently rely on protected area networks to ensure their survival. Further confirmation of this comes from BirdLife South Africa's study of 10 young Secretarybirds fitted with tracking devices: these birds spent less than 10 per cent of their time in formally protected areas.

These studies also proposed several habitat-related explanations for the widespread decreases. An increase in woody vegetation is believed to be responsible for the plunge in Secretarybird numbers in the Kruger Park and is also a probable contributory factor to decreases in other parts of South Africa. This bush encroachment has also been implicated as a threat in Botswana and eSwatini (Swaziland). Such encroachment is typically driven by overgrazing and other land-management practices. But rising atmospheric carbon levels associated with global warming are also increasingly being implicated, as tree growth responds positively to elevations in available carbon. The South African study suggested that additional and possibly even more significant threats to Secretarybird habitats come from agricultural cultivation, dense human settlement in both urban and rural settings, and commercial afforestation and other forms of land degradation, such as through excessive burning and intensive stock farming. Habitat information from the South African Coordinated Avifaunal Roadcounts (CAR) project provides direct and compelling confirmation that in most regions Secretarybirds strongly prefer natural habitats and largely avoid transformed areas.

There are some exceptions to this. Secretarybirds make extensive use of crop-fields and artificial pastures in the Overberg and Swartland areas in the



ALBERT FRONEMAN

The Secretarybird needs wide open spaces, a resource in increasingly short supply.

fynbos biome, regions most likely unsuitable for them ancestrally. The species may also be attracted to the relatively limited extent of irrigated crop-fields in the Karoo, where its prey may be more locally abundant than in the surrounding semi-arid plains. In the commercial ranchlands of the bushveld regions in the far north of South Africa (areas not covered by the CAR project), a raptor project during the period 1976–1981 suggested that clearance of woodland for agriculture in some areas had probably benefited the species (but in adjacent Highveld areas, that habitat was lost to afforestation and crop farming).

In a world of ever-shrinking horizons, the conservation of the Secretarybird (and similar large terrestrial birds characteristic of open environments) presents formidable challenges. The solutions lie not only in reducing the factors that directly cause them to die, but also in maintaining the landscapes that allow them to live, with the latter likely to be the ultimate limitation. For this reason, BirdLife South Africa is taking a lead in biodiversity stewardship initiatives designed to secure privately owned farms as appropriately managed conservation areas for species like the Secretarybird.

DAVID ALLAN



Conserving **South African birdlife** is the start to conserving the **broader environment**. The **White-winged Flufftail's** existence is threatened by the destruction of its **high-altitude wetland habitat**. This species breeds in both **Ethiopia** and **South Africa**. The sustainability of our planet should be our **highest concern** and therefore we should conserve this endangered species.

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TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS
ANDREW JENKINS

The Benguela upwelling region extends along the south-western coastline of Africa, from Cape Agulhas in South Africa to Benguela, a small village on the north coast of Angola. It is characterised by a wind-driven process in which cold, deep water is cycled to the surface, bringing nutrients up from the depths and rendering the inshore waters of Namibia and western South Africa among the most productive in the world. Historically these waters have sustained a complex and diverse marine food chain, underpinned by massive blooms of phytoplankton – indicated by huge, mobile schools of small fish and most obviously expressed by an impressive array of predatory fish, mammals and birds.

But in the past 100 years conditions in the Benguela have been changing. Anthropogenic impacts have escalated exponentially, the once infinite shoals of pelagic sardines and anchovy are scattered and hugely depleted and many of the abundant seabird populations that these forage-fish used to sustain have been reduced to fractions of their former glory.

Fifteen coastal seabird species breed within the Benguela system. Seven of these – African Penguin, Cape Gannet, Cape, Bank and Crowned cormorants, Hartlaub's Gull and Damara Tern – are endemic to the Benguela and six are red listed as both regionally and globally threatened. Population trajectories of iconic species like African Penguin and Cape Gannet are precipitously downward (particularly in South Africa), with the penguin all but poised on the brink of extinction.

Thankfully, there is a wealth of top-class, conservation-driven research directed at quantifying, understanding and hopefully mitigating this crisis before numbers slip below >

benguela blues

Why are southern Africa's iconic coastal birds facing extinction?



critical levels. Most of South Africa's coastal birds have been surveyed and monitored closely over the past few decades and we have a decent handle on a range of key biological and demographic parameters. This wealth of empirical data was used recently by Dr Rob Crawford and his team at the Oceans and Coasts branch of the national Department of Environment,

Forestry and Fisheries in a review of the status quo (Crawford RJM et al. 2018. 'Bottom-up and top-down control of the Benguela's ecosystem's seabirds.' *Journal of Marine Systems* 188: 133–141). Their study focused in particular on the extent to which our threatened, endemic seabird populations are being influenced by changes happening either lower in the food

chain (bottom-up regulation), higher in the food chain (top-down regulation) or outside the food chain (such as mortality from oil spills, disturbance, climate change). As one might expect given the subtle complexity of the system and the myriad interdependent factors at play, the answers are not as clear as one would like and the possible solutions even less so.

Some of the depletion in seabird numbers dates back to the days of guano collection on the region's offshore islands, which caused high levels of disturbance at most of the main breeding colonies. In combination with direct harvesting of birds and eggs for human consumption, this intrusive activity almost certainly triggered the downward slide for many species way before accurate records were



kept. More recently, wholesale die-offs associated with avian diseases, the incipient effects of chronic levels of chemical and other forms of pollution, the in-your-face consequences of several massive oil spills and artificially high levels of predation by invasive domestic cats, Cape fur seals, Great White Pelicans, Kelp Gulls and others have also inflicted telling blows to already struggling populations. But the primary causal factor for the so-called 'guano' seabirds is a scarcity of food brought on by the rapid expansion of the commercial fishing industry.

Assessed in terms of returns achieved by the total fleet of purse-seine fishing boats, anchovy and sardine numbers in the Benguela system have fluctuated over the past 50 to 100 years (with peaks in the 1950s and '60s and at the turn of this century), but in the west have experienced a significant drop over time. Similarly, hydro-acoustic surveys of pelagic fish biomass around the Benguela coast have seen estimates of sardine stocks drop from highs of about four

above and previous spread *The African Penguin generates significant revenue from tourism at the Boulders breeding colony outside Cape Town, but are we doing enough to save this iconic seabird from extinction?*

left *The curiously reptilian Bank Cormorant is an important predator of rock lobster, caught mainly in kelp beds close to the shore.*

million tons in 2002 to a low of about 250 000 tons in 2016. There have also been substantial shifts in the distribution of stocks, see-sawing between the West Coast and the southern and east coasts, but with a net loss from the west and gain in the south-east.

Of the birds making up the Benguela seabird community, the African Penguin seems to be the least able to deal with this radical reduction in food availability. Because penguins are flightless, they are particularly vulnerable to terrestrial predators and generally only nest on islands where such predators are absent. Unfortunately, >



above *Cape Cormorants can still be seen aggregating in huge numbers at their roosts or while tracking shoals of small pelagic fish at sea.*

opposite *As anchovy and sardine stocks dwindle, Cape Gannets supplement their diet by scavenging from trawler nets.*

there are no islands of suitable size and quality to support breeding penguins anywhere between Cape Agulhas and Algoa Bay. Coupled with this, African Penguins seem to be mainly dependent on anchovy and sardine as staple foods and unable to switch to alternatives as numbers of these preferred species decline. So while the penguin population has partially shifted east along the coast and formed mainland colonies, it has not been able to fully track the shift in pelagic fish stocks and has been exposed to unprecedented levels of

chronic food scarcity, causing marked reductions in the size of established breeding colonies (in some cases to the point of local extinction), reductions in energy returns for provisioning adults and lowering of breeding participation and success and overall survival.

The net result is that African Penguin numbers have shrunk from a total of approximately one million breeding pairs early in the 20th century to roughly 20 000–25 000 pairs now, a loss of more than 98 per cent of the historical population in just 100 years. As if this weren't sufficient cause for concern, the decrease in numbers has accelerated in recent times, with the remnant population being reduced by more than 50 per cent this century. The African Penguin is now listed as Globally Endangered.

The situation for the Cape Gannet has been similar, although it has been

able to partially supplement its diet with other fish species, buffering it from the full impact of the dwindling pelagic fishery. However, the available alternative prey for gannets – which includes discarded fragments of hake from deep-sea trawlers – doesn't have the nutritional value of sardine and anchovy. Consequently, breeding birds along the West Coast have been found to forage over longer distances, feed their young less frequently and suffer significant losses in body condition. As flying and wide-ranging birds, gannets have also been able to move with their prey to some extent, although nesting colonies are few – there are only six along the entire Benguela coastline – and they are situated exclusively on off-shore islands.

Cape Gannet numbers overall have reduced by almost 50 per cent in the past five decades, from about 250 000



TREVOR HARDAKER

breeding pairs in the 1960s to 135 000 pairs today (70 per cent of which reside in the easternmost colony on Bird Island in Algoa Bay). Not surprisingly, the species is presently listed as Globally Endangered.

Cape Cormorant is another formerly super-abundant Benguela species that has experienced a significant drop in numbers. While its fate remains closely linked with erratic and ever-dwindling

sardine stocks, its capacity to nest in a variety of situations allows it to move the centre of its breeding distribution when necessary and to spread its collective breeding effort over a broad front. Despite these adaptive traits and even though the species appears to still be common close to areas densely populated by people (such as the Cape Peninsula), the pervasive effects of food shortage have resulted in the global

population decreasing by more than 50 per cent in the past 20 to 30 years (to about 120 000 breeding pairs). The Cape Cormorant is also currently listed as Globally Endangered.

The Bank Cormorant naturally occurs at lower densities than penguins, gannets and Cape Cormorants and has very different foraging habits, but it has been similarly affected by human abuse of marine resources. Instead >

of feeding on small pelagic fish, Bank Cormorants consume mainly bearded goby (in the north Benguela) and rock lobster (in the south). Populations of rock lobster have collapsed in the west, resulting in corresponding dips in Bank Cormorant numbers. Consequently, the Bank Cormorant population (which now stands at only about 4000 breeding pairs) has decreased by more than 60 per cent in the past 20 to 25 years and the species is unsurprisingly categorised as Globally Endangered.

Two smaller and markedly less specialised seabirds have fared better under the conditions of flux prevailing in the Benguela system. Although it is a regional endemic, the Crowned Cormorant is a smaller species that feeds on a range of fish caught in shallow water close to the shore. As such, it is not directly threatened by human exploitation of offshore fish stocks although associated changes in seal and pelican

numbers and behaviour may be significant. Both those species have been recorded preying heavily on fledglings at the largest and most important Crowned Cormorant nesting colonies, significantly reducing breeding success. Although currently numbers seem to be stable, the Crowned Cormorant population is relatively small and remains intrinsically vulnerable.

The Swift or Greater Crested Tern occurs as an endemic subspecies in the Benguela and also feeds offshore, mainly on shoals of small pelagic fish. However, as a much less specialised bird than its truly endemic counterparts, it is far better equipped to cope with changing environmental conditions. Operating more in terms of a 'movable feast' strategy, Swift Terns can quickly establish breeding colonies in new areas at times of food abundance and they have a far more catholic diet. They take a high proportion of anchovy or sardine when and where these are



present in numbers, but include more than 50 other fish species, as well as squid, prawns and even insects in their wide range of potential prey. The Swift Tern population of the Benguela has actually increased over the past two decades, but one has to wonder how much longer even this ecologically and behaviourally pliable species can persist.

The small pelagic fish stocks of the Benguela upwelling region constitute one of the largest and most valuable fisheries in South African waters, designated for both direct human consumption and for the production of fishmeal to sustain livestock and other domestic animals.



Unfortunately, sardine stocks in particular have been heavily exploited and this fishery has collapsed in the west. While this direct degradation of the Benguela system has almost certainly been exacerbated by more fundamental but less tangible drivers of ecological instability (most notably human-induced warming of the atmosphere and corresponding shifts in weather patterns and ocean currents), the present-day, parlous state of the Benguela's seabirds clearly indicates a recent scarcity of suitable prey.

While it is still theoretically possible to save this unique community of coastal birds, doing so won't be easy. Human pressures on the Benguela are considerable and likely to intensify, while the

relationships between seabird and pelagic fish numbers are complex. At the very least, it will require the implementation of precautionary catch limits and extensive no-fish zones around important breeding sites. Statistical models suggest that such simple and obvious adjustments of policy and administration could begin to arrest negative trends, perhaps gradually returning some stability to an overworked and collapsing ecosystem. Granted, there will always be strong financial imperatives resisting such a far-sighted approach, so the risk of failure remains high. Conversely, depleted pelagic fish stocks have dire consequences for the fishing industry too, as well as for marine ecotourism. If the monetary value

above *The Swift Tern can adjust what it eats and where it breeds in response to changes in the availability of food.*

opposite *Crowned Cormorants feed on small fish caught in the rocky shallows along the shore and are not directly affected by commercial overfishing.*

of the system is somehow to be salvaged, might we could see a business-driven paradigm shift in management approach to resuscitate the Benguela's ecological integrity that fortuitously benefits its irreplaceable birdlife.

Or perhaps, just to be sure, we should take the advice of global environmental commentator George Monbiot and just stop eating fish. ♦

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six OF THE best

Spring birding destinations in and around Gauteng

TEXT JOHN KINGHORN

AFTER HAVING SPENT a large part of winter inside, wrapped in blankets and longing for warmer days, for birders living in Gauteng the promise of spring brings with it a tangible sense of excitement. They relish the thought of the arrival of summer migrants and more daylight hours in which to enjoy them.

So where best to welcome this change of seasons? Surely Gauteng, the sprawling conurbation that encompasses Johannesburg and Pretoria, can't be all that exciting as a birding destination? Well, many birders would argue otherwise and the six destinations included here – chosen and rated on a combination of their productivity, quality of birding, levels of safety and accessibility – bear out why the province has six of the best must-visit spots this spring.



MARIEVALE BIRD SANCTUARY RICHARD DU TOIT



SQUACCO HERON RICHARD FLACK (3)

RIETVLEI NATURE RESERVE

Accommodation ☒

Accessibility ☒☒☒☒

Safety ☒☒☒☒

Estimated spring species count 80+

Cuckoo Finch anyone? Covering 3870 hectares, the Rietvlei Nature Reserve is probably one of the best sites in Gauteng to connect with this often tricky and elusive summer visitor. Spend your time in the reserve's extensive swathes of grassland where cisticolas and prinias abound and you should strike it lucky. Cuckoo Finches are a parasitic species and soon after they arrive they begin to focus their energy on breeding, shifting their attention from one another to finding potential hosts to incubate their eggs and raise their chicks.

Other star attractions at Rietvlei include Northern Black Korhaan, Plain-backed Pipit, Red-winged Francolin (on the vlei route) and Dark-capped Yellow Warbler. The skulking and highly sought-after African Finfoot occasionally puts in an appearance along the Grootvlei Spruit.

Good to know

This fantastic reserve is conveniently situated in south-eastern Pretoria. It is extremely well maintained and has facilities ranging from ablutions to well-placed bird hides along the Rietvlei Dam shoreline. There is even a lovely picnic site for those who wish to enjoy a relaxed lunch after a productive morning's birding.

BUFFELSDRIFT CONSERVANCY

Accommodation ☒☒☒☒

Accessibility ☒☒☒

Safety ☒☒☒☒

Estimated spring species count 110+

Situated north of Pretoria and west of Roodeplaat Dam, the Buffelsdrift Conservancy is ideal for those who want to enjoy extremely rewarding birding without having to venture too far from the confines of Pretoria (or even Johannesburg). The conservancy comprises predominantly acacia-dominated

thornveld and its associated species. These include birds such as White-backed Mousebird, Marico Sunbird, Marico Flycatcher, Acacia Pied Barbet, Violet-eared and Black-faced waxbills, Cape Penduline-tit, Scaly-feathered Finch and Kalahari Scrub Robin.

The presence of well-treed residential gardens, orchards and nurseries leads you to feel that you are in residential Pretoria rather than in a conservancy and it is in these settings that gems such as African Crane, River Warbler and Spectacled Weaver have been recorded. In the evening the quiet network of dirt roads also lays claim to being one of Gauteng's best when it comes to nocturnal stakeouts for the breeding intra-African migrant, Rufous-cheeked Nightjar.

Good to know

This is primarily a residential conservancy and many of the roads have restricted private access. You need to make arrangements before your visit to ensure you can gain right of entry to the entire



CUCKOO FINCH

road network and the best birding spots. To do so and to receive a list of available accommodation options, e-mail Rob Geddes (robertgeddesrg13@gmail.com), chairman of the conservancy's committee.

VLAKLAAGTE ROADSIDE ROUTES

Accommodation ☒

Accessibility ☒☒☒☒

Safety ☒☒☒

Estimated spring species count 80+

A hotspot for larks and cisticolas displaying in summer, the Vlaklaagte grasslands can prove extremely productive for those birders wishing to hone their LBJ-identification skills. The area is situated beside the R25 road north of Bronkhorstspuit in the east of Gauteng and birding is done almost entirely along the roadside on a network of dirt roads that weave between local farms.

The key to seeing some of these notoriously difficult-to-identify LBJs is to >



RUFIOUS-NAPE LARK



VERREAUX'S EAGLE ALBERT FRONEMAN

keep your ears open. The characteristic calls of the so-called 'cloud-scraper cisticolas' (Cloud, Wing-snapping, Desert and Zitting) are often some of the first you hear as they perform their display flights at ridiculous heights, the birds bouncing and dipping their way into becoming mere specks in the sky. Resident lark species add their voices to the springtime serenade and Eastern

Clapper, Fawn-coloured and Melodious larks are generally fairly abundant.

These pristine Highveld grasslands also host important trigger species and an early start will inevitably yield sightings of Marsh Owl in the road or on fence poles and if you're lucky perhaps even an African Grass Owl, another resident of these dense grasslands. As the sun rises, keep your eyes and ears open

for Blue Crane, Secretarybird, White-bellied Korhaan and occasionally even Southern Bald Ibis.

Good to know

Birding along public roads can often prove challenging – where do you decide on the best places to stop and spend your time? Personally, whenever the opportunity arises, I drive very slowly, with the car windows down and my foot mostly off the accelerator. The decrease in noise from both the engine and wind finding its way through your open window enhances your ability to pinpoint vocalising and/or displaying birds.

WALTER SISULU NATIONAL BOTANICAL GARDEN

Accommodation ☒

Accessibility ☒☒☒☒

Safety ☒☒☒☒

Estimated spring species count 60+

Best known by members of the general public for its resident pair of Verreaux's Eagles, among ardent birders the garden is more popularly celebrated for its spring cuckoo spectacle. Towards the latter half of September migratory cuckoo species begin arriving in droves and the indigenous gardens resound with the calls of Red-chested, Black, Diederik and Klaas's cuckoos; Jacobin and Levaillant's are around, but are less frequently recorded.

A stroll along the banks of the gently flowing Crocodile River puts you in a good position to encounter the enigmatic little Half-collared Kingfisher, while time spent on the main lawns near the entrance will almost guarantee a sighting of Brown-backed Honeybirds in aerial display. The lawns will possibly even deliver an accipiter or two chasing the small numbers of sparrows, mannikins, waxbills and finches that often gather on the lush grass. A visit to the popular Sasol Dam bird hide is a must on every visit, as you can never quite predict what will be waiting to greet you as you peer through the hide's slats.



WALTER SISULU NATIONAL BOTANICAL GARDEN ALBERT FRONEMAN



AFRICAN RAIL RICHARD FLACK

Good to know

A hike to the top of the waterfall can be rewarding, both for seeing birds and your general fitness. Always remember to take a small daypack with you to store any necessities needed for your hike and bear in mind that there are no ablution facilities at the top of the waterfall. While birding here is variable and reflects what's on offer in the rest of the garden, Striped Pipit, Lazy and Wailing cisticolas and Cape Rock Thrush are regularly encountered.

MARIEVALE BIRD SANCTUARY

Accommodation ☒

Accessibility ☒☒☒☒

Safety ☒☒☒☒

Estimated spring species count 80+

A photographer's paradise, Marievale is undoubtedly one of Gauteng's

more productive wetland reserves and affords you the opportunity to get close to a plethora of wetland-associated species. Early morning is generally the most popular time for both birders and photographers, for the lighting is magnificent and the birds are more active as they embrace the warmth of the sun.

Birding begins the moment you sign in at the sanctuary's gate, often with an African Marsh Harrier quartering over the reedbeds or over-zealous male Pin-tailed Whydahs performing their elaborate bouncing displays along the roadside verges. The track under the powerlines and leading off to the left is generally a good starting point. Depending on water levels, it can lead you fairly deep into the wetland system and provides for great photographic opportunities, with birds often sitting motionless and unperturbed on clumps of mud as you pass by.



BLACK HERON RICHARD FLACK



YELLOW BISHOP ALBERT FRONEMAN (2)

Be sure to spend time at some of the sanctuary's well-maintained hides (Hadeda, Otter and Flamingo are my personal favourites) and definitely explore the road along the northern section of the sanctuary. This is extremely productive for rallids and as the season shifts from spring to summer, anything is possible. Black, Baillon's and African crakes, African Rail and Red-chested Flufftail are all generally reliable along this stretch and there is also the possibility of Spotted and Corn crakes, both of which have been recorded here.

Good to know

High water levels in spring are generally not of concern, but once the Highveld rainy season begins it is best to exercise caution (especially along the powerline road mentioned above)

when navigating around the reserve. Roads can become muddy and it's also not uncommon for water to flow over the 'main' roads, especially as you head to either Flamingo Hide or the north of the sanctuary.

SUIKERBOSRAND NATURE RESERVE

Accommodation ☒☒☒

Accessibility ☒☒☒☒☒

Safety ☒☒☒☒☒

Estimated spring species count 80+

A combination of the reserve's proximity to Johannesburg, its accessibility and its diversity of habitats and concomitant variety of locally occurring species makes this a local favourite for birders and bird clubs.

If you visit the reserve in early spring, keep an eye out for some remaining winter migrants that may have been slow to depart. Fairy Flycatchers and Sentinel Rock Thrushes move into the reserve during the colder, winter months and some take their time in moving off. The reserve is also

one of the better places in Gauteng to locate the exquisite Malachite Sunbird. Monitoring the skyline is likely to produce raptors such as Jackal Buzzard and both Black-chested and Brown snake eagles on the hunt. Binoculars should be kept at the ready in anticipation of seeing one of the reserve's more noticeable 'specials', the bright Yellow Bishop, which at this time of year sports its freshest look.

Birders are advised to travel the one-way circular route, which extensively covers all the reserve has to offer. They will find a picnic site and ablutions at Holhoek, the halfway mark on the route.

Good to know

The reserve is deservedly extremely popular and the roads can also become rather congested during weekends and public holidays. It is a lot quieter during the week and the decrease in activity can enhance your birding experience, as the birds tend to be less skittish and come slightly closer to the road. Also keep a lookout for the other wildlife and reptiles that you may see in the reserve. ♦



SUIKERBOSRAND NATURE RESERVE



SKYWALK

ETHICAL INDULGENCE

While in a world-class African city, at the world-class Saxon Hotel, Villas and Spa you will enjoy natural beauty and solitude in the harmoniously landscaped garden. Birds are abundant in the tranquil woodland setting and can be seen foraging in their favoured trees, at drinking spots among the foliage or bathing in the waterfall features. Early-morning birding is an ideal way to revive your spirits in the fast-paced, driven tempo of Johannesburg.

Stroll along the skywalk leading through the canopy of fig and stinkwood trees that are laden with climbing wild grape and flowering canary creeper and offer fruits relished by more than 15 species of birds. You may see a nest or two almost hidden in vegetation and during the breeding season you will most likely hear the chirping of hungry chicks begging for yet another meal. Red-chested and Diederik cuckoos, diminutive Cape White-eyes and White-bellied Sunbirds proliferate in this dense woodland. At the end of the skywalk, a serene garden surrounds the boardwalk that leads to the luxurious private Saxon Villas.

After birding, enjoy one of the Saxon's specialties – an elegant morning or afternoon high tea in the Piano Lounge.

The decadent, bite-sized savoury and sweet delights that accompany perfectly infused tea are handcrafted to exceptional standards in the pastry kitchen.

The Saxon's green initiatives are comprehensive and include water-saving measures, recycling practices, energy-efficient lighting and thermal glazing building designs for temperature control, heat-pump technology to reduce energy consumption of water heaters, environmentally friendly marketing materials and an abundant food garden. Sarapana is a rooftop organic garden and has been providing the freshest, sun-ripened fruits, vegetables and herbs for the hotel's chefs since it was created in 2012. Bees, Laughing Doves and Hadeda Ibises are the natural gardeners here! Boreholes and rainwater tanks supply the water through an efficient irrigation system and garden clippings and vegetable waste feed a worm farm that produces a nourishing worm tea for the plants.

While enjoying sumptuous light meals created from ingredients sourced from Sarapana at The Terrace restaurant, watch as Greater Striped Swallows quietly swoop down to sip water from the vast infinity pool. A Brown-hooded Kingfisher may dart by after an insect or dwarf gecko. The Terrace is the ideal location at which to relax over a leisurely lunch or afternoon sundowners.

End your day with a stroll after sunset, listening for Spotted Eagle-Owls or Western Barn Owls rustling their feathers as they slowly prepare to start their nocturnal forays. For dinner, Qunu restaurant extends a warm welcome or you can experience an unforgettable meal at Grei. Within a year of opening, Grei was nominated the 'World's Leading Fine Dining Hotel Restaurant 2018' by the World Travel Awards – one of the many prestigious international awards the hotel has been accorded over the years.

 <p>SAXON HOTEL, VILLAS AND SPA JOHANNESBURG</p>	<p>36 Saxon Road, Sandhurst 2196, Johannesburg</p>
	<p>Tel: +27 (0)11 292 6000 www.saxon.co.za</p>

rinse & repeat

Goliath Heron fishing behaviour

During a game drive along the Mphongolo River near Sirheni Bushveld Camp in the Kruger National Park, we noticed a Goliath Heron stepping out of a large pool in the river with a catch wriggling in its beak. It had snagged a rock-catfish *Austroglanis sclateri*. The bird walked onto a small rocky outcrop adjacent to the river, dropped the prey onto the ground and proceeded to stab it. After jabbing at it a number of times, the heron took the prey, now covered in sand, in its beak, climbed down from the outcrop and walked back into the shallows of the pool, where it rinsed it thoroughly. This process of stabbing the fish on the outcrop and then washing it was repeated at least a dozen times. Towards the end, the bird held the fish by its tail and, if it still wriggled, stabbed it again.

After about 20 minutes since it had caught the fish, the heron yet again stepped into the pool, still grasping its



prey. Suddenly it raised its feathers in alarm and then performed a few awkward 'dance steps' in the water. An African Fish Eagle swooped in with its beak

open and attempted to pirate the meal. At the last moment the heron dropped the fish into the water and deployed its sharp beak on the raptor, leaving it in no



doubt as to its displeasure. The eagle decided that discretion was the better part of valour and flew away.

The heron recovered its prey from the water, rinsed it thoroughly, juggled it around in its open beak and swallowed it head first. More than 20 minutes had elapsed between the catching and the swallowing of the fish. The heron took a leisurely drink of water, washed its beak in the pool, then strolled up the outcrop and sat on its haunches to enjoy an after-lunch nap in the sun.

Later that afternoon we saw a repeat performance at an adjacent pool. A Goliath Heron executed the same ritual of repeatedly stabbing and cleaning the rock-catfish before swallowing it. On this occasion, with no disturbance from other predators, the time between catching and swallowing was 18 minutes. This was once again followed by drinking from the pool and a thorough beak cleaning.

The next morning the ritual was re-enacted. This time we did not see the initial catch and so could not determine the duration. The prey and the entire process and behaviour were, however, identical. This rather protracted procedure obviously affords other predators time to take the opportunity to potentially steal the heron's meal.

A couple of days later we stayed overnight in the Shipandani hide, where we



observed a Goliath Heron catching a kurper, a member of the tilapia family. The fish appeared larger than the rock-catfish and on this occasion the heron simply swallowed its wriggling prey without stabbing it; the whole process took about 30 seconds.

The rock-catfish is a very resilient species, with a tough, leather-like skin, and it can remain alive out of water for a significant length of time. The pectoral and dorsal fins have razor-sharp spines with serrated edges, covered with a slimy substance. The fish has a vigorous wriggling action and if handled it is capable of

inflicting quite deep stab wounds. These are very painful and probably aggravated by the slime on the spines.

The heron must instinctively be aware of the dangers associated with swallowing rock-catfish alive; hence the precautions it takes to ensure that the prey is dead before swallowing it. I presume that the bird's repeated, vigorous beak washing is to clear the slime and/or sand from its mouth. The heron also seems to know intuitively that these precautions are not necessary for swallowing kurper.

LOUIS AND INA TALJAARD

keep watching...

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **ALBIE VENTER**
www.africa-unlocked.com

IT IS SAID that more than 11 trillion images are taken every year. Although the vast majority of these are cellphone captures of someone's meal, holiday destination or family occasion, a quick glimpse at various social media platforms will reveal that much of the focus is on wildlife and bird photography.

Before 2000, most wildlife photographers were usually ardent naturalists who went to great lengths and invested heavily in both time and equipment to communicate wildlife behaviour effectively to their audiences. They were role models whose ethics and standards ought still to be aspired to by today's wildlife photographers. But as that age of education makes way for one of instant gratification, the aforesaid doyens of conservation photography are becoming less common. Photographs celebrating rare species and seldom-seen behaviour now take second place to those in which technical merit is paramount. Ethics often appear to evaporate when everything hinges on whether an image could be considered worthy of being shortlisted in a photography competition or reach some milestone number of 'likes' on Facebook.

I am intrigued by wildlife, which is why I chose to pursue professional nature guiding as a career. Sharing this wonder with like-minded people and educating others is so richly rewarding that it doesn't warrant any complaints from me, yet the frustration of being at a rare sighting only to hear comments like 'bad light', 'facing the wrong way', 'too far' or even 'boring' can drive even the most tactful guide down a path where we should perhaps not venture.

Fortunately there are still many people around who, I hope, would not object to spending time with any of the birds shared in this portfolio and for whom the beauty of the creature outweighs any technical shortcoming! >





The moment when we drifted up to this Shoebill that we chanced upon where the White Nile flows into Lake Albert in Uganda ranks as one of my personal birding highlights. This mostly sedentary bird waited until the very last minute before it flushed, providing more than frame-filling photo opportunities.



above The noisy Brown-headed Parrot is frequently encountered, but it can be difficult to see clearly and even trickier to photograph in leafy tree canopies. Ripening pods of the long-tailed cassia drew the parrots out into the open and offered a photographic stake-out over the course of a few days as the birds clambered about in the trees, unperturbed by our presence in a car parked nearby.

previous spread I prefer to reflect behaviour in my wildlife photographs rather than capture 'pretty pictures' that have little context. While the stream of water shown here may be distracting to some people, I deliberately chose this image from dozens of others to illustrate the male Burchell's Sandgrouse's belly-soaking behaviour. Water is absorbed in the belly feathers and then transported to chicks at the nest, miles away from any surface water.



above Only one species of wattle-eye occurs in southern Africa, so it is always a treat for local birders to see these forest species elsewhere on the continent. In East Africa, the Brown-throated Wattle-eye is common; the chestnut-maroon throat of the female (shown here) can appear surprisingly dark, almost black, in its forest habitat.

opposite A Tanzanian endemic, the Grey-breasted Spurfowl is relatively common in the Serengeti, where it often advertises its presence by calling from an elevated perch.





Whiling away the 'unproductive' time of day, I discovered a nesting Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird in a game lodge garden. The bird kept bringing insects and seeds of various shapes and colours to its chick in the nest and that, with the soft light of the riparian forest combined with fill-flash, resulted in engaging images.

The parasitic breeding behaviour of the Great Spotted Cuckoo and its starling or crow hosts is seldom witnessed, despite the relatively large size of the species. During this rare sighting out in the open, a Meves's Starling – the duped parent – feeds a juvenile cuckoo.





above The eye colour of Spotted Eagle-Owl chicks changes from brown to yellow as they mature. In this clutch where the chicks hatched just a few days apart, the dark eyes easily identify the younger of the two as it sits alongside its yellow-eyed sibling.

opposite The clear-eyed glare of the dapper Little Sparrowhawk. A sighting of this rapacious raptor is always special and when one decides to sit long enough in clear view in its forest habitat to enable you to get a decent photograph, it is a real bonus.



RWANDA revival

Akagera & Nyungwe national parks

TEXT **JOHN MAYTHAM** • PHOTOGRAPHS **DANA ALLEN**



I saw my first Shoebill in Rwanda on 14 June 2005. I was with a group of birders and we had travelled east from Kigali to the Akagera National Park with our primary birding goal being the Red-faced Barbet, the closest that Rwanda has to an endemic species. (It can also be seen in Uganda and Burundi, but Akagera is the safest bet for this particular tick.) We dipped on the barbet; despite being told that it was a near-certainty in the parking lot outside the entrance lodge, it was not to be. But there was the unexpected bonus of very decent, if distant, scope views of

the Shoebill, which John Gould in his 1851 paper ‘On a new and most remarkable form in ornithology’ assigned the scientific name *Balaeniceps rex* and described it as ‘the most extraordinary bird I have seen for many years’. It is one of those birds the full impact of which is >



top An aerial view of Magashi Camp, on the banks of Lake Rwanyakazinga. The boardwalk is ideal for birding around the camp.

impossible to anticipate through photographs and paintings. ‘*Abu markub*’ (‘father of the shoe’) as the Arabs call it, is so much more striking in the flesh than in two dimensions and for me that impression has not been diminished after further sightings in Uganda, Zambia and South Sudan.

Akagera in 2005 was in serious need of TLC. Thousands of post-genocide returnees settled there from 1995 and, very understandably given the circumstances, human needs outweighed those of the environment. The refugees destroyed the forest for timber and hunted the animals for protein, and allowed their long-horned cattle to graze in the grasslands. The need to protect the livestock from predation meant that the park’s lion population, estimated to be approximately 300-strong, was wiped out. Black rhinos were also poached into local extinction. By 2005 the refugees had moved out of the park, but the depredations of that period were still very evident in the paucity of

animal sightings and the dearth of any tourism infrastructure.

There has been a remarkable turnaround since then. In 2010 African Parks Network, after reaching an agreement with the Rwanda Development Board, began to manage the reserve and has pumped many millions of dollars, much of it from the Warren Buffett Foundation, into security – electric fencing and human and canine anti-poaching measures – and reintroduced lions and black rhinos.

Another recent development saw Wilderness Safaris granted a concession to operate a five-star lodge, Magashi, on the banks of Lake Rwanyakazinga in the north of Akagera. Wilderness invited me to spend a couple of nights at the lodge, an invitation I accepted with unseemly haste, not least because I saw an opportunity to (finally) catch up with the Red-faced Barbet and to have at least one more Shoebill encounter. Success with the first part of the mission, failure with the second. In fact,



above A pair of Swamp Flycatchers dry off after a rain shower.

below The compact Grey Kestrel, immobile and observant.



THERE HAS BEEN A REMARKABLE TURNAROUND ... AFRICAN PARKS NETWORK ... BEGAN TO MANAGE THE RESERVE AND HAS PUMPED MANY MILLIONS OF DOLLARS ... INTO SECURITY - ELECTRIC FENCING AND HUMAN AND CANINE ANTI-POACHING MEASURES - AND REINTRODUCED LIONS AND BLACK RHINOS

there hasn’t been a Shoebill sighting in Akagera since August 2017, despite plenty of dedicated searching, including from the air.

The Shoebill is neither the continent’s rarest bird nor its most endangered: the IUCN Red Data List of late 2018 categorises it as Vulnerable, with a decreasing population trend and a global population of between 3300 and 5300 individuals in somewhere between 11 and 100 locations. The IUCN report

goes on to state: ‘There is little doubt that the species is declining in Tanzania, Zambia and Rwanda, with declines perhaps in Uganda as well, and the species may be more threatened than available information suggests.’ If one considers that the largest population is in South Sudan, then the plight of the Shoebill becomes even more worrying given the extreme political instability in that area, as well as the rapidly accelerating destruction of the niched habitat that the bird favours.

There are many threats to the Shoebill listed by the IUCN, but the one that seems most pertinent to the Rwandan population is climate change. The feeling on the ground is that there is more frequent and more intense flooding, resulting in a much wider dispersion of papyrus. This is squeezing the availability of the patches of hippo grass that is the favoured habitat of the Shoebill. It is theory at present, but a research project has recently begun that might throw more light on the paucity of Shoebill sightings.

>



CHRISTIAN BOIX



NIK BORROW

above *Papyrus Canary*, one of the specials that are more easily seen from a boat than on land.

top *Akagera* is one of the few places in Africa where you can reasonably confidently expect to see *Red-faced Barbet*.

right *Palm-nut Vulture*. A very localised species in South Africa, it is relatively common in *Akagera*.

The pain of missing the Shoebill was alleviated by the excellence of the general birding, made easier by being with a Magashi guide who had spent seven months scouring the concession area for stakeouts. Akagera has a bird list of more than 500 species, which is not bad for an expanse of just more than 1100 square kilometres. Many of them can be seen in South Africa and most of the rest across the border in Tanzania, but there are still many that are of interest.

The papyrus birds are made more accessible by the boat trips on the lake offered by Magashi – Papyrus Gonolek showed very well, as did Swamp Flycatcher and Carruthers's Cisticola. Papyrus Canary and White-winged Swamp Warbler were heard more than seen, but they are present in good numbers. The Red-faced Barbet is the major savanna species drawcard, but finding the elusive Hildebrandt's Francolin was also a highlight.

I found it fascinating to see the abundance of many birds that are visitors to South Africa in our summer: six species of cuckoo, Woodland Kingfisher, Violet-backed Starling and more. There is a rocky koppie a short distance from the Magashi camp where Pennant-winged Nightjar is seen on most nights. White-headed Saw-wing and Blue-headed Coucal on the final drive to the park

THE PAIN OF MISSING THE SHOEBILL WAS ALLEVIATED BY THE EXCELLENCE OF THE GENERAL BIRDING, MADE EASIER BY BEING WITH A MAGASHI GUIDE WHO HAD SPENT SEVEN MONTHS SCOURING THE CONCESSION AREA FOR STAKEOUTS

gate took the trip list for the three days to 170 species – pretty good given that much of the time was spent indulging the inexplicable desire of other guests to drive past possible bird sightings to look



at lions and leopards! The first bird seen outside the park was a Ruaha Chat, confirming previous reports that this species prefers farmland to woodland. Sooty Chat is almost ubiquitous in the park.

Akagera provides the numbers, but Rwanda's other main birding destination, Nyungwe Forest National Park, provides the main rarity interest. BirdLife International puts the number of Albertine Rift endemics at 41 and Nyungwe hosts more of these than any other birding destination, excluding the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo because of the security risks of visiting there. Space doesn't permit

a full description of my day-and-a-half birding from the roadside and along the Bigugu Trail and around Kamiranzovu Marsh, but I was very happy with my total of 14 Albertine Rift endemics, including, thankfully, Red-collared Babbler and Grauer's Swamp Warbler, which I had missed on a previous trip. The one disappointment was not experiencing the canopy walkway – a 160-metre-long and 70-metre-high suspension bridge – accessible from the Uwinka Reception Centre, because I could only do so as part of a guided tour costing \$60.

I also had the opportunity to meet with senior officials from the Rwanda

Development Board, which is responsible for the tourism industry. It is abundantly clear that they are taking tourism very seriously and that they understand the contribution that birding can make to their goal of doubling tourism receipts over the next five years. Birding infrastructure is being improved and birding knowledge among local guides is being tackled very actively. I found a far higher level of interest in and knowledge of Rwanda's birds among local guides than was the case during previous visits.

There are many countries in Africa where you can rack up a much >



above *Black-headed Gonolek* is almost a trash bird in Akagera, especially around the camp.



ARIADNE VAN ZANDBERGEN

left *Roadside birding in Nyungwe Forest National Park may well deliver some of the Albertine Rift endemics.*

more impressive species count than in Rwanda, but the combination of the Albertine Rift endemics of Nyungwe and the exquisite natural beauty of the tiny jewel that is Akagera is irresistible. Few countries in Africa offer the efficiency and order of Rwanda – the minibus taxis all have governors fitted that restrict them to a maximum speed of 80 kilometres an hour, for goodness' sake – and there is also something almost indefinably enriching about travelling in a land that has made such progress in dealing with the indescribable horrors of 1994. ♦



TIM NEARY (3)

ARBOR MONTH

Why we need trees

September is Arbor Month, when South Africans are encouraged to plant trees. Perhaps first we should consider what's so important about trees and why we need them in our lives.

Trees are magical in that when planted, and if the prevalent climatic conditions suit their requirements, they grow majestically and provide a variety of ecosystem services to humans and other inhabitants of our planet. For many bird species, trees are indispensable, providing food, shelter and nesting material.

Through photosynthesis during hours of sunlight, trees absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen to replenish the oxygen that we breathe or that is sucked up by industrial activities. They remove carbon from the atmosphere and store it as 'wood' within their bodies. Humans use this wood as fuel and as timber for building and furniture. Other products from trees include organic fertiliser, which is derived from their bark, as well as essential items ranging from paper to binding agents and fabric, which are manufactured in various industrial processes.

The medicinal value of trees is often understated and not only is the focus of traditional medicinal healers, but forms

a large component in Western medicine too. With its *Warburgia salutaris* Project, Sappi highlights the importance of this tree – the pepper bark – and recognises its value to traditional healers and communities around South Africa. The company is helping to propagate and distribute pepper bark saplings in a bid to restock areas, notably the Kruger Park, with this red-listed species.

Trees render services we tend to forget. Fallen leaves serve as mulch and humus, while roots bind soil. The trees themselves provide food and homes for insects, birds, mammals and reptiles – even the occasional amphibian. And for humans they give shade from sun and shelter from rain.

The nectar and berries of trees attract birds, and they, along with bats and insects, provide a pollination service in return for food and shelter. Humans can lend a helping hand by hanging bird feeders in trees and rubbing suet on the bark (birds will come not only for the suet, but also for foraging grubs). Even dead trees and logs serve a purpose for birds.

And from a human perspective, as well as being a good place to spot a variety of wildlife, trees themselves make awesome photographic objects, alive or dead.



above and top *Even a small garden can offer birds food, water, an old log shelter and the opportunity to nest.*

above, left *Planting a medicinal Warburgia salutaris in a rural community.*

Trees in general live for an extremely long time and many have seen history take place beneath their canopies. If only trees could talk, think how much more factual knowledge we would have about history.

We challenge you to plant a tree this spring and leave a legacy for the planet to enjoy. If you don't have a garden, why not donate a tree to your local park, school or community? Help to protect and improve the health of our biodiversity – and watch carefully to see which birds are grateful for your gift!

TIM NEARY

sappi



focus CLOSE TO home

Photographing garden birds

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **EWAN POTGIETER**

We've all been there. You check your social media accounts and scroll through the bird-watching groups, see remarkable photographs of birds and wonder if you could ever take something similar; you review your recent images from the local nature reserve and ponder how other photographers manage to get the birds to sit still and pose like supermodels; you admire the lighting showing the bird's colours to best advantage.

You may start second guessing your equipment and begin looking at the hottest camera deals, but there's a problem: you would need about R200 000. Your bank balance prepares to fight back and you contemplate whether you really need both your kidneys...

Here are some options that may help you create great photographs in your own garden, together with some low-budget ideas that will keep your organs where they belong.

Lighting

The most important consideration when taking bird photographs in your garden is lighting. Position yourself with the sun at your back. It's best to get soft, early-morning light on your subject – it enhances the colours and captures the highlight in the bird's eye.

Background

A common problem with taking bird photographs in your garden is that

BIRDS ARE CREATURES OF HABIT AND I HAVE NOTICED THAT THEY BEGIN TO GATHER A FEW MINUTES AFTER I'VE PUT OUT THE FOOD. IT TOOK ABOUT TWO WEEKS FOR THE WORD TO SPREAD AND THEREAFTER I WOULD SEE A REGULAR CROWD OF EAGER FEEDERS SHOWING UP EVERY DAY AND AT A FAIRLY PREDICTABLE TIME

inevitably you include an unnatural (and possibly unsightly) background, such as a fence, boundary wall or window. Instead of these artificial elements ruining your shot, try this: go to your local hardware shop and buy about a 2m x 2m length of light brown shade-net. Place it approximately two metres behind your birdfeeder to act as a backdrop. This will simulate a natural, veld-like impression behind the bird and there won't be any leaves or branches to clutter the background. It also adds depth to the shot, which enables your subject to stand out as the star of the show.

Feeding stations

Oversupplying birds at a feeding station can result in the birds becoming dependent. I usually use a cup of seed a day and also put out fruit, such as an apple or a banana, for the frugivorous species. This helps to increase the variety of species visiting your garden, but limits their dependence. Birds are creatures of habit and I have noticed that they begin to gather a few minutes after I've put out the food. It took about two weeks for the word to spread and thereafter I would see a regular crowd of eager feeders showing up every day and at a fairly predictable time.

Perches

Buying braai wood makes most South African men happy enough without any additional perks, but the next time



you get a pack, sort through it and select a piece with some character; one with a crack or an additional twig can work very nicely. For the more DIY inclined, try drilling a hole in the back of the wood and adding some seed or fruit. That way you can avoid the food appearing in your shot but still entice the bird to be in the ideal position for your image.

You'll notice that invariably the birds initially land on the same perch before they begin to feed. Remember to change the perch every so often to avoid all your images featuring a variety of birds sitting on the identical perch! Seed eaters require smaller branches to land on whereas the fruit-eaters are somewhat bigger and heavier, so try to provide adequate perches to cater for both groups.

If you have some time, try this: collect some branches from your garden that have finer twigs and some leaves still attached and place them in a strategically positioned bucket of water. The water will slow down the rate at which the leaves wilt and you can get a weekend of use out of some branches like this.



above An example of a set-up, showing the shade-cloth backdrop and a branch placed in water and fixed above some seed.

top A male Cape White-eye displaying for his female at the water feature.

opposite A visiting male and female Cut-throat Finch.



A perfectly positioned Dark-capped Bulbul perching on one of the set-up branches.

Just add water

To attract more bird species, you need to provide them with a regular source of water. If possible, arrange some branches to cover the edges of a bird-bath so that it looks more natural. The

ultimate is to position some branches hanging low over the water (or ideally, if you can, install the feature itself under a tree) and get an image of a bird with its reflection showing in the still water.

Hideaway

I've had success creating a comfortable position in my bedroom and

photographing out of my window towards a perch that is just five metres away, with the sun behind me. I use the window blinds to camouflage my position, then insert my camera lens through the blinds in the direction of where the birds gather, unaware of my existence. I have friends who use pop-up hides; these can work well, but the birds first need to become accustomed to the hide and you may end up sitting in it for long periods waiting for a shot. It's better to be inside where you can grab a cup of tea while you're waiting, without disturbing the birds.

Camera equipment

A major advantage of photographing in your garden is that you don't need top-of-the-range equipment because most of the environment is under your control and you can literally create the scene. I've achieved the best results when the birds' perch is about five metres from my position. I use my Canon 100-400mm lens and the shots I get are great (even if I do say so myself).

Conclusion

It is possible to take really good photographs of birds and it need not cost a fortune. Working in your own garden gives you the chance to practise your photographic skills and to get to know your camera. Hopefully the suggestions offered here are cost effective and easy enough for you to begin generating striking images for those social media accounts. Good luck and enjoy! ♦



TREVOR BUTLER

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Insectivore is a Johannesburg-based company that believes in the benefits of insects to the environment. It has an urban insect farm and specialises in cultivating mealworms. Placed in a bird feeder, live or dehydrated mealworms will attract many insectivorous species, from Karoo Thrush and Cape Robin-chat to Green Woodhoopoes, to your garden. The company's insect manure is also a superior organic fertiliser. For more information, contact info@insectivore.co.za or visit www.insectivore.co.za

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RED-WINGED STARLING ALBERT FRONEMAN

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS DUNCAN BUTCHART

In this series we feature a range of indigenous trees, shrubs and creepers that are particularly appealing to birds. Similar and related species are grouped together. Although it may be tempting to grow as many species as you can, you need to consider the overall appearance that you want to achieve with your garden space. For this reason, an illustration of the general shape and the average height in cultivation of each featured tree or shrub is provided; these are guidelines only and suggest average, not maximum dimensions.



WILD PEACH *Kiggelaria africana*

A small, fast-growing tree or bushy shrub found in temperate forest edges from the Cape Peninsula to the foothills of the northern Drakensberg, it also occurs along streams and on the cooler southern sides of rocky outcrops across the Highveld. The marble-sized fruits split open into a star shape, presenting the wax-coated orange seeds to frugivorous birds. A common butterfly, the garden acraea *Acraea horta*, lays its eggs on the leaves and the resultant browsing caterpillars can occur in great abundance, which attracts Red-chested, Diederik and other cuckoos. The wild peach thrives in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Bloemfontein, Durban and Cape Town and should be included in any garden aimed at enticing birds.



Average 4–6m
Semi-deciduous



WILD PLUM *Harpephyllum caffrum*

A large, open-branched tree that can eventually form an expansive crown if given enough space. With its dense, attractive foliage it also makes a good screen or barrier. It is native to warmer coastal regions and escarpment forests, but is able to withstand slight frost and can do well in Highveld gardens if given a warm, sheltered position. The orange-coloured plums are relished by turacos, mousebirds and other frugivores.



Average 6–10m
Evergreen, but old and new leaves are bright red

GARDENING FOR BIRDS



WILD PEAR *Dombeya rotundifolia*

Common across much of the northern and eastern parts of southern Africa, this is a good tree for smaller gardens, where it should be planted in a sunny, north-facing position. Able to tolerate a wide range of conditions, the wild pear can be successfully cultivated in the winter-rainfall regions of the southern Cape. It is one of the first trees to flower in early spring, when its papery white blooms make a very pretty show. Although the wild pear does not provide fruit, seeds or nectar to birds, the many invertebrates that feed on its leaves, pollinate the flowers and hide in its fissured bark will lure insectivores.



Average 3–5m
Deciduous



RIVER BUSHWILLOW *Combretum erythrophyllum*

This open-branched tree usually takes on a crooked but interesting form, with the low outer branches sometimes touching the ground. One of numerous *Combretum* species that occur in southern Africa, this is the most tolerant of varied climatic conditions. Found along riverbanks and drainage lines in the Highveld and Lowveld, it is relatively fast growing and can withstand the harshest frosts. For birds, it provides perches, shelter, roosts and nesting sites, while the catkin flowers are a magnet for many small insects.



Average 4–8m
Deciduous



FLAME CREEPER *Combretum microphyllum*

A vigorous scrambler that can cover fences and pergolas, putting on metres of growth in a year. Masses of tiny scarlet flowers appear in spring, turning the entire plant bright red and enticing sunbirds and canaries, among others. If allowed to scramble into a tree, it may eventually take over, so some judicious pruning will be required. It is local to riverine thickets in the warmer parts of South Africa and Zimbabwe, making it a wonderful plant for Lowveld and coastal gardens.



Scrambles up to 20m
Partly deciduous



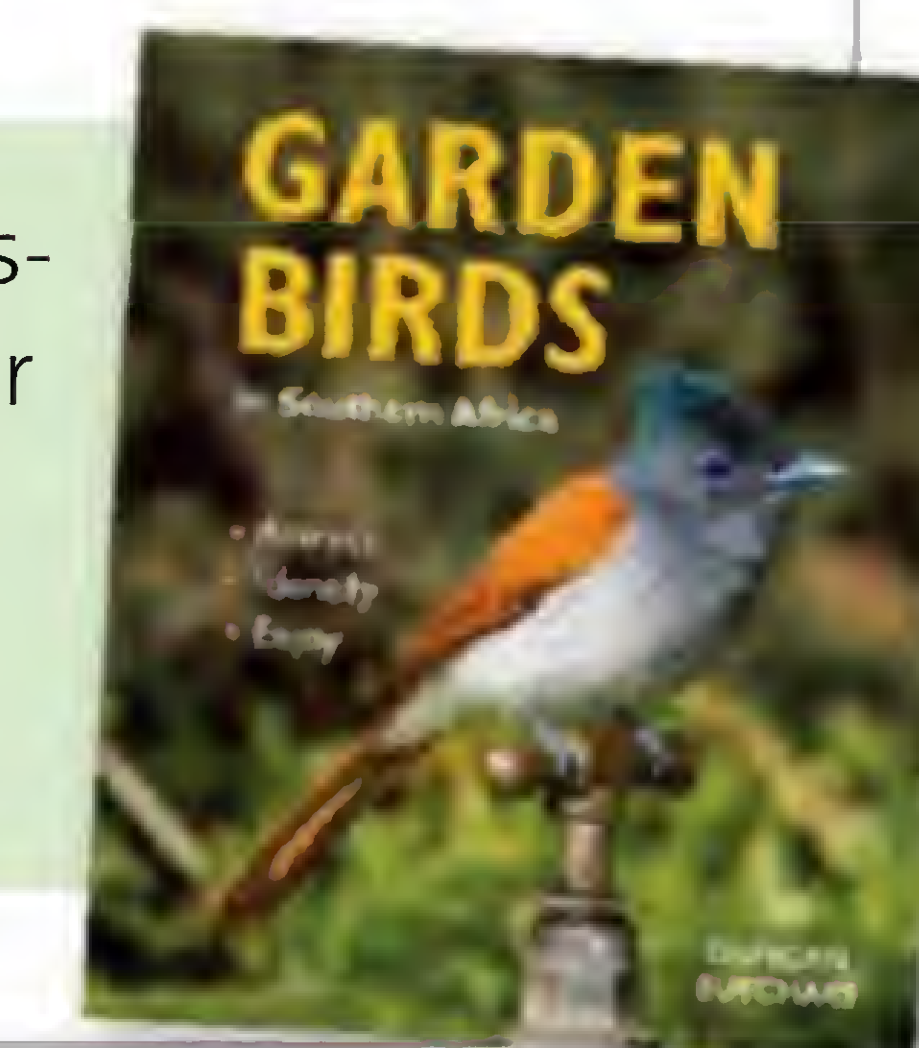
PRIDE OF DE KAAP *Bauhinia galpinii*

Not strictly a tree, this woody climber winds its way into other vegetation. It is indigenous to the warmer north-eastern parts of South Africa as well as much of Zimbabwe, but it is hardy and widely cultivated, even in the southern Cape. Its tendency is to scramble into and over other plants, but it can be clipped into a neat and tidy bush. Although not rich in nectar, its showy coral-red flowers draw butterflies, while the tangled stems and branches provide roosting and nesting sites for various bird species.

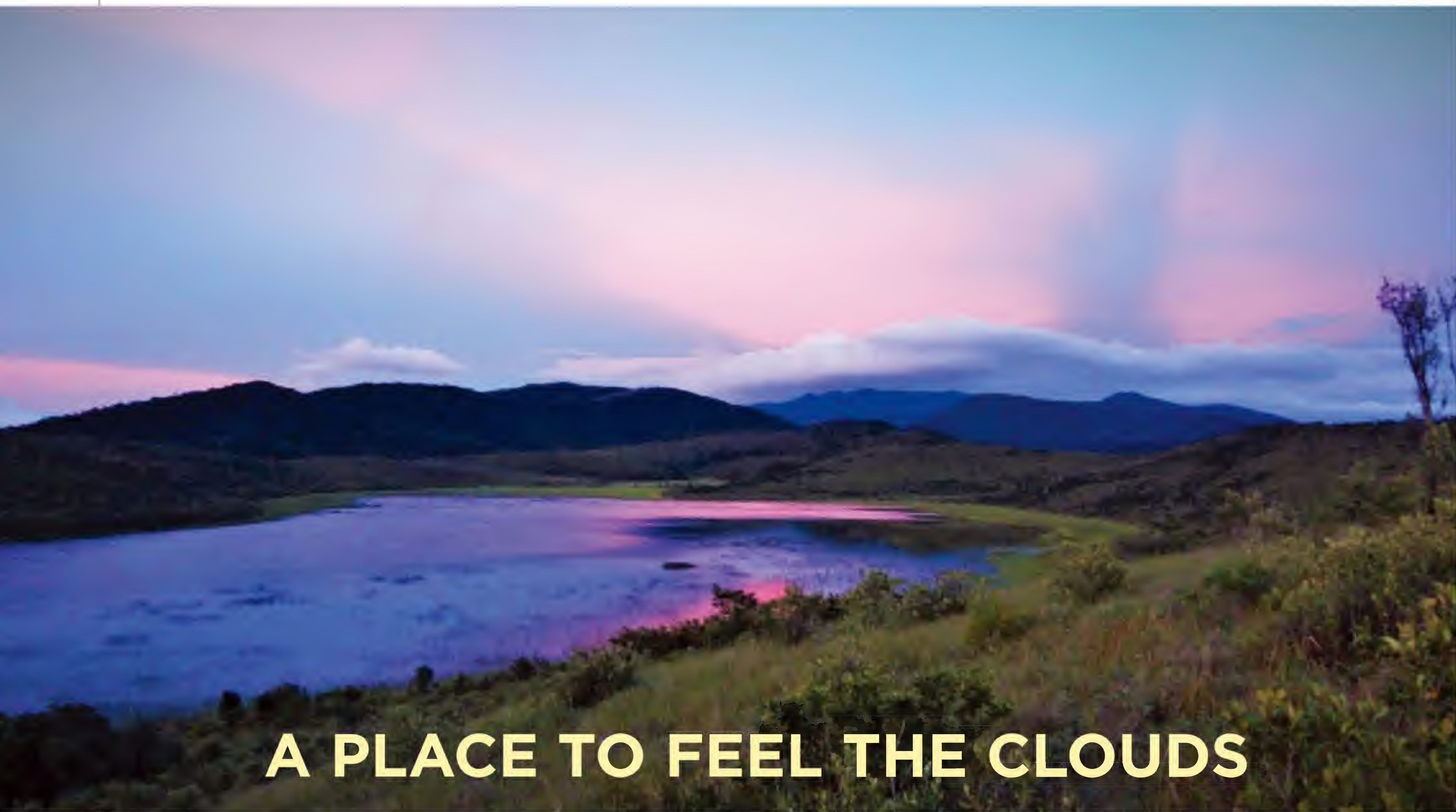


Scrambles up to 15m
Evergreen

The information in this series is taken from Duncan Butchart's *Garden Birds in Southern Africa*, with the kind permission of the publisher, Struik Nature. This inspirational guide will help you to create a bird-friendly garden wherever you are in southern Africa. It discusses garden habitats and how to create them, suggests ideas for providing water, food and nest sites for birds and profiles a range of trees, shrubs and grasses to plant to attract birds. The book also features 101 garden birds likely to be found in gardens across the region.



BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA news



A PLACE TO FEEL THE CLOUDS

DALE WRIGHT (2)

Expedition to Mahimborondro

A remote, high-altitude rainforest in Madagascar that has never been surveyed? I repeated John's words back through the Skype channel like an echo. "That sounds too good to be true!" But true it was. In northern Madagascar there is an isolated section of rainforest that has recently been declared a protected area and was yet to be explored in any detail by scientists – surely the holy grail for any conservation biologist!

A sunset view over a freshwater lake and the pristine rainforests of Mahimborondro.

When John Mittermeier and I met at the International Congress for Conservation Biology in France in 2015, we were drawn together by a shared passion for birds and adventure and immediately began plotting an expedition to a far-flung place. John had previously worked with Dr Lily-Arison Rene de Roland (or Lily, as he is known) of The Peregrine Fund's Madagascar Project. On a recent trip to visit the site of the rediscovery of the Madagascar Pochard, Lily told him about the Mahimborondro protected area and mentioned that as far as he knew, there had

been no detailed scientific exploration of the rainforest.

The Mahimborondro protected area is located in the far north of Madagascar and covers approximately 75 000 hectares. Described as a natural resources reserve, it is characterised by the high-altitude rainforest that covers more than half of its area; lower down, secondary grassland and pasture, as well as small wetlands and marshes, make up the rest. Mahimborondro and the adjacent Bemanavika Harmonious Protected Landscape were both declared protected areas in 2015, thanks



TRISTAN SPINSKI

to the efforts of Lily and The Peregrine Fund. Fortunately, the isolation of the site has meant that it has escaped the habitat loss that prevails across many other parts of Madagascar.

However, such wilderness areas exist precisely because they are hard to reach, and accessing 'the place to feel the clouds', as it is known in Malagasy, at the height of Madagascar's wet season was no easy task. A three-day drive north of Antananarivo, including a final day of 11 hours to cover 45 kilometres through extremely rough terrain, brought us to the Bemanavika field camp. After poring over maps of the area and chatting with our Malagasy colleagues, we identified a route that would then take us from Bemanavika to the even more remote Mahimborondro. At first light the next day our team of 40, including 25 local villagers to help carry our equipment and supplies, set off across the grassland.

The first day's walk of approximately 25 kilometres brought us to a beautiful lake at the southern edge of the Mahimborondro protected area. This was our base camp for two nights as we set out to establish a trail and a camp within the forest itself. Although the grasslands of Madagascar are not particularly rich in species, there are

'specials' wherever you look, a result of the high level of endemism. As we hiked across the degraded grassland habitat we saw Madagascar Larks, Madagascar Cisticolas, Red Fodys and the Madagascar-endemic subspecies of African Stonechat – we even managed to flush a tiny Madagascar Buttonquail.

Our base camp at the lake did not disappoint and our records of the threatened and endemic Madagascar Grebe, as well as adults and ducklings of the Endangered Meller's Duck, provided yet more evidence of the importance of this site for Madagascar's avifauna. As the setting sun's rays filtered through the mists of the Mahimborondro forests beyond the lake, we were treated to silhouette views of a Madagascar Nightjar and a skulking Madagascar Coucal, yet more endemics to add to our list.

Establishing access routes into remote rainforests is definitely not for the faint-hearted, but our team was up to the challenge. Once we'd set up a field camp next to a stream deep within the forest, it was over to the scientists to get to work. The team comprised three ornithologists, two entomologists, two herpetologists and a veterinarian, together with five field technicians from The Peregrine Fund.



above *The Common Sunbird-Asity was widespread throughout the forests of Mahimborondro during our survey.*

above, left *The expedition team, comprising international scientists and local Malagasy field biologists.*

The ornithological field work included making observations as we walked transects in the forest and setting up mist nets near the camp. Fortunately, our survey transects followed a clear gradient that enabled us to record detailed information about the elevations at which the different species occurred. In several instances, the elevation at which we recorded a species was significantly higher than the maximum for that species published in relevant literature. Specific examples where our observations exceeded these maximums by at least 300 metres include Madagascar Harrier-Hawk, Madagascar Sparrowhawk, Crested Coua, Velvet Asity, Red-tailed Newtonia, Spectacled Tetraka and Rand's Warbler.

We were fortunate to come across the occasional bird party, which gave us great sightings of that incredible group of Malagasy birds, the vangas. >



JOHN MITTERMEIER (2)



above The Madagascar Grebe is a threatened species that was present at the lake on the edge of the Mahimborondro protected area.

top A confiding Rufous-headed Ground-roller was a great find in the isolated rainforest of Mahimborondro.

frog described in 2008. The team found at least five range extensions for amphibians and one specimen that may be new to science. Mahimborondro was also productive, turning up 18 frog and 13 reptile species. The species composition at this site was similar to that at Bemanevika and included *S. nussbaumi*, providing another range extension for this Critically Endangered species. At Mahimborondro there were several range extensions and about five amphibians that may be new to science.

The entomologists collected a total of 70 dragonflies, approximately 100 beetles, 300 spiders and seven zooplankton samples from three different lakes. At their light trap, 350 moths from three major groups, including emperor and hawk moths and geometrids, were collected. Standing with them in the moonlight watching the variety of moths swoop in from miles around was truly magical!

The arduous travelling conditions reduced our survey time in the field slightly, but we still came away with solid data that will be used to inform management of the protected area. While it is a truly incredible experience to visit a remote forest and document its biodiversity, the reason for this adventure was to support the conservation of the site. Fortunately, Lily and The Peregrine Fund, our key local collaborating partner, are the primary management authority for Mahimborondro and Bemanevika and they will ensure that our data feed directly into actions to conserve the site. We left the forest both exhausted and excited, grateful for the wilderness areas that still exist on the planet and determined to ensure their future.

DALE WRIGHT, IBA CONSERVATION IMPLEMENTATION MANAGER

A GUIDE WITH **vision** Bheki Shakes Mbonambi

Tucked in against the coastal dune forest of the northern KwaZulu-Natal coastline, the 750-hectare Lake Sibaya, with its pristine, crystal-clear waters and white sand beaches, is a wonder of nature and a jewel in the crown of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Growing up in close proximity to this slice of birding paradise, with its abundant wildlife and breathtaking landscapes, had a profound impact on shaping the growing aspirations of Bheki Shakes Mbonambi and setting him on the path to becoming a fully fledged nature guide.

After receiving bird-guide training from BirdLife South Africa in 2008, Bheki went on to establish Sibaya Lake Tours, which specialises in showing both South African and international birdwatchers the avifaunal riches of south-eastern Maputaland. Over the past decade he has established a reputation as one of the region's premier guides, having led innumerable clients to some of the region's specials, which include Rosy-throated Longclaw, Lemon-breasted Canary, Rudd's Apalis, African Broadbill, Swamp Nightjar, Pel's Fishing Owl and Woodward's Batis, to name but a few.

Now one of the senior guides based

in the Maputaland region, Bheki is undoubtedly passionate about the birds and, perhaps more importantly, the habitats of the region and he has taken it upon himself to act as a torch-bearer for conservation in the Mseleni community, which lives close to Lake Sibaya. He has assisted with the collection of IBA monitoring data that contribute to the protection of this site, focusing on the impact that habitat modification has had on bird communities in the Lake Sibaya area.

He firmly believes in giving back and over the past decade has been actively involved in educating young people through the Mseleni Environmental Education Programme, which focuses on explaining the wonders of the greater iSimangaliso ecosystem to schoolchildren in his area. In addition to his environmental education activities, Bheki was involved in the establishment of the Mseleni Indigenous Nursery, which provides seedlings for the rehabilitation of disturbed areas in the Western Shores area of iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

Without a doubt, Bheki Mbonambi has had a profound impact on taking conservation efforts in the Mseleni and



MARTIN TAYLOR

Sibaya area of KwaZulu-Natal province further and he is determined to continue doing so in order that future generations will be able to appreciate the biodiversity of this very special corner of Maputaland.

Swarovski Optik is proud to be associated with this ambassador for conservation and supports him by providing world-class optics in order to further his bird-guiding career and conservation efforts.

Bheki Mbonambi can be contacted on 072 043 4717. For further information about BirdLife South Africa's Bird Guide Training Project, visit the website www.birdlife.org.za or e-mail martin.taylor@birdlife.org.za

MARTIN TAYLOR,
MANAGER: SPECIAL
PROJECTS AND
AVITOURISM



THE AFRICAN BIRD FAIR 2019

BirdLife South Africa is excited to invite you to join us at The African Bird Fair. The fair will take place over the weekend of 14 & 15 September 2019 at the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden in Gauteng. With a wide variety of exhibitors, presentations, guided walks and workshops lined up, it is set to be a weekend not to be missed! For more information, e-mail Emma Askes at emma.askses@birdlife.org.za



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Owl Awards 2019

Each year BirdLife South Africa presents Owl Awards to its supporters, whether corporates or individuals, who have gone above and beyond to assist the organisation in its efforts to 'give conservation wings'.

EAGLE-OWL AWARDS

Kimberley Ekapa Mining-JV

Nature lovers will always associate Kimberley Ekapa Mining-JV (KEM-JV) with Lesser Flamingo conservation, both in the past when the company was responsible for the construction of the flamingos' breeding island on Kamfers Dam and more recently when it stepped in to help rescue of thousands of chicks at the dam. By providing equipment for aerial surveys and sponsoring multiple flights that enabled rescued chicks to be sent to rehabilitation facilities, KEM-JV contributed to turning a potential disaster around. The company also sponsors BirdLife South Africa's KEM-JV Fellow of Conservation position.

Swarovski Optik

For the past three years Swarovski Optik has championed BirdLife South Africa's Bird Guide Training Programme, providing funding for guides trained by the programme to market themselves at exhibitions such as the African Travel Indaba, The African Bird Fair and BirdLife South Africa's annual Flock events. The company has also generously supplied senior guides with loan pairs of its flagship 10x42 EL binoculars, profoundly transforming their careers. In addition, it has supported The African Bird Fair and advertised in *African Birdlife* magazine. BirdLife South Africa sincerely appreciates the backing provided by Swarovski Optik and Andrew Whysall of Whylo, its distributor in South Africa.

OWL AWARDS

Alastair Findlay

A cartoonist by profession and a member of Wits Bird Club, Alastair volunteered his expertise when BirdLife South Africa and the Rare Finch Conservation Group were planning to put together 'Waxi the

Hero', an environmental education puppet show featuring the Orange-breasted Waxbill. He spent many months perfecting the storyline and making the puppets for the first shows, which were performed at the Flufftail Festival in 2017. They were a huge success and were repeated in 2018 and 2019 and presented at The African Bird Fair last year, with scripts updated to reflect relevant topics. It is hoped that every child in South Africa will become acquainted with 'Waxi' and gain insights into the importance of conserving wetlands.

Charles Malherbe

Charles is the cornerstone of conservation action on the West Coast, actively protecting estuarine IBAs at the Olifants and Berg rivers and Verlorenvlei. He also supports the Biodiversity Stewardship Programme's initiatives by providing labour, materials and expert advice. Among many other achievements, his teams have kept long stretches of the Berg River's banks free of alien vegetation for more than three years, allowing native species to re-establish, and has implemented a similar project at Moutonshoek. By also keeping the waterways free of alien species, he is helping to safeguard water quality, restore biodiversity and increase the systems' resilience to climate change. Charles's tangible results have earned him the respect of partners, landowners and local communities.

Garth Shaw & Khanyisane Falake

As a teacher at Claremont High School in Cape Town, Garth saw an opportunity to promote birding as an inexpensive extra-mural activity that would nurture an appreciation for the environment. In 2016 he started the Claremont High Bird Club, recruiting colleague Khanyisane to help and subsequently take charge. The

club meets once a week to sharpen skills, undertakes outings, hosts expert speakers and has taken part in two Birding Big Days; last year its members even organised a tour of the Eastern Cape (see *African Birdlife* November/December 2018). Garth and Khanyisane are opening birding to new communities and developing citizen scientists and future conservation leaders in the process.

Geoff McIlleron

For five decades Geoff has been involved in birds and birding and keen to encourage birding skills and love for the environment in others. His efforts have ranged from guiding the establishment of the Sasolburg Conservation Society to playing a leading role in Wits Bird Club and now in the Nature's Valley Trust, where he helps to raise awareness of the environment among the community in general and schoolchildren in particular. His photographs have illustrated many birding books, but he is perhaps best known for his work with Peter Ginn, with whom he shared authorship of *The Complete Book of Southern African Birds* and *The Ultimate Companion for Birding in South Africa*, among others.

Jessie Walton

An example of an ordinary person getting involved in citizen science and academic research, Jessie runs a small nursery on her farm in Elgin, rehabilitates injured birds and participates in conservation projects. For more than 10 years she has been collecting data and samples for the 'mystery buzzard' project; for six years she and Rob Martin were field monitors on EIA projects (she discovered the first known Black Harrier roost during this time); and in 2012 she began a long-term project on the Brown-backed Honeybird and Karoo Prinia that

has evolved into research into the co-evolution of brood parasites and their hosts. Her conservation work includes the Western Cape Wetland Rehabilitation Project to create habitat for waterbirds in agricultural landscapes.

Judy Stockill

Judy, a tireless supporter of BirdLife South Africa and longstanding member of Rand Barbet Bird Club, instigated a birding education initiative for golf caddies at the Parkview Golf Club after encouraging her regular caddie, Shorty, to notice the birds around them. She arranged for Samson Maluadzi, a BirdLife South Africa-trained guide, to train Shorty and two other caddies in their home language of tshiVenda; put up a garden birds poster in the caddies' changing room; and organised a morning with guide Raymond Rampholokeng in Soweto to learn about bird guiding as a business option.

Kevin McCann

Kevin has made enormous contributions to bird conservation, mainly in KwaZulu-Natal, on a number of fronts. While working for EWT, he led research and conservation initiatives of the South African Crane Working Group and laid the groundwork for other crane-oriented projects still running today. He went on to work for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, where he was responsible for establishing the KZN Biodiversity Stewardship Programme, resulting in the first Biodiversity Stewardship protected areas being proclaimed in 2009. He continues to drive this form of conservation in the province and has become a respected proponent of it. A keen supporter of BirdLife South Africa's IBA and Policy & Advocacy programmes, Kevin most recently has partnered with the former to implement conservation work in southern KwaZulu-Natal, particularly in relation to mistbelt grasslands and the Blue Swallow.

Martin & Melanie Potgieter

By donating their time, mileage and local expertise, A-list volunteers Martin and Melanie contribute enormously to



MARK D. ANDERSON

the IBA and Terrestrial Bird Conservation programmes in the Free State. Having been atlas for SABAP2 since 2009, they have submitted 1220 full protocol cards for more than 250 pentads, paying particular attention to the Rooiberg-Riemland IBA near Bethlehem. They monitor Southern Bald Ibis breeding and roosting sites around Fouriesburg, Bethlehem and Clarens, submitting valuable reports to the project, and have contributed reports of sightings and nest locations to the Secretarybird project. Less tangible but no less important, their example encourages others to volunteer for conservation-related projects.

Rozanne Fleet

In the aftermath of the fires that ravaged Knysna and Plettenberg Bay in winter 2017, Rozanne mobilised an army of 'guardians' to set up feeding stations around the two towns and provisioned them with bird food sent down by Elaine's Birding & Wildlife Products in Gauteng. She also launched a Facebook page, Garden Route Birds, as a platform to share information about responsibly helping birds until the area recovered. Now that the crisis is over, the Facebook page focuses on making people aware of the region's bird diversity and providing information about feeding birds sustainably. With 10000 followers, it has

The recipients from left to right: back row Alastair Findlay, Judy Stockill, Kevin McCann, Melanie and Martin Potgieter, Andrew Whysall (Swarovski Optik) and Peter Hohne (Kimberley Ekapa Mining-JV). front row Rozanne Fleet and Ro'ees van der Speck (Owl Award on behalf of Garth Shaw and Khanyisane Falake). absent Charles Malherbe, Geoff McIlleron, Jessie Walton and Rocco da Silva.

become one of the most influential social media outlets on birds in Africa.

OWLET AWARD

Rocco da Silva

Inspired by his love for the marine environment and penguins in particular, 10-year-old Rocco set up The Future Kids to inform children and adults about pollution. In little over a year he has organised about 15 beach clean-ups involving more than 100 participants, who have removed hundreds of kilograms of rubbish. He has also given talks at green awards ceremonies and travels to schools and groups to spread the word of keeping the environment clean. SANCCOB has benefited from a donation of R10 000 from The Future Kids, and Rocco himself 'adopted' a penguin at the facility, covering the cost of a bird from check-in to release. He is challenging pollution head-on and encouraging others to do the same.

BBD GOES TO THE PROVINCES
Provincial challenges in the 2019 event

Participation in Birding Big Day (BBD) continues to increase each year, as does social media coverage of the event. And in 2019 we expect even more growth, as BBD will take place later this year, on Saturday, 30 November, giving migratory species such as Amur Falcons time to arrive and lengthen the species lists.

Always keen to find new ways to improve BBD, we listened to participants' calls for a provincial challenge and will be implementing it this year: the data recorded by BirdLasser users will be sorted into provinces, a move that we hope will present a more level playing field. So all the sightings logged on BirdLasser will automatically appear on national and provincial maps. If a species is logged in Cape Town, it will be



counted on the South Africa map and on the Western Cape map – but not on the maps of the other provinces. Teams that want to target the provincial challenge will have to ensure that they stay within the chosen province.

So why not challenge your friends to a provincial competition? You may be the first team to become a provincial champion!



Competition aside, BBD is about enjoying the exceptional diversity of birds in South Africa, so please participate and help us tell everyone how wonderful our birdlife is.

You need to register before taking part. For more information, visit www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/events/birding-big-day-2019/; to register, go to www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/events/birding-big-day-2019/birding-big-day-2019-entry-form/. To find out more, you can also e-mail me at bbd@birdlife.org.za

ERNST RETIEF, MANAGER:
DATA AND SPATIAL PLANNING

CONSERVATION: A NEW ROLE

Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson has taken up the position of head of conservation at BirdLife South Africa. She holds a doctoral degree in Molecular Zoology from the University of Stellenbosch and subsequently carried out postdoctoral research in phylogeography (using population genetics to consider the geographic distribution of a species) at the University of California, Berkeley. She was also the African recipient of the L'Oréal-UNESCO for Women in Science Award in 2008.

In her previous role as the manager of the Terrestrial Bird Conservation Programme, which she held for nine years, Hanneline gained significant conservation, research and management experience, which stands her in good stead in her new position. Her key responsibilities include oversight of BirdLife South Africa's various conservation programmes. Some strategic changes to the Conservation Division are anticipated so that the team can continue to carry out innovative

and effective work and expand its involvement into southern Africa.

BirdLife South Africa has to align its work with BirdLife International's strategy, due for revision in 2022, and with the biodiversity targets set at the Convention of Biodiversity Conference of Parties in China in 2020. We will continue to support the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) with its work in Africa, especially on the East Atlantic Flyway, and to assist other BirdLife partners on the continent. However, the local focus will not be lost and will include, for example, continued support for the government in its implementation of the National Protected Area Expansion Strategy.

Hanneline looks forward to leading BirdLife South Africa's team of passionate and dedicated conservationists in their efforts to protect this country's threatened birds and their habitats. With her strong academic background, she advocates that conservation decisions



should be based on high-quality science. She enjoys cultivating both personal and professional relationships with colleagues and strategic partnerships with like-minded organisations to the benefit of the birds of South Africa.

ISABEL EARNS HER PhD

Isabel Human, BirdLife South Africa's HR manager and PA to the CEO, started her PhD research in 2012 while still employed by the Department of Zoology and Entomology at the University of the Free State. When her research proposal was accepted, she officially enrolled for the degree in 2014 and completed it successfully in 2018.

'Forever curious, I wanted to explore the Okavango Delta with my former colleagues in the aquatic ecology research team at the University of the Free State,' explains Isabel. 'Being the single mother of three children and pursuing a full-time career made completing the degree challenging, but the achievement is reward beyond measure. I will always be grateful for the support I received from the university, and Dr Cawood and Professor Van As in particular, and I am also indebted to Mark Anderson and BirdLife South Africa for giving me the space to finish it'



ALL TOGETHER

Because we at BirdLife South Africa are carrying out our work all around the country, an annual meeting each year is incredibly valuable in that it enables us to update one another on what we're doing and hold discussions about key issues and concepts. We can thus carry on our work as a unified team and continue to make progress. We also take the opportunity to bring in guest speakers who provide skills training and help to motivate and inspire us further. The staff meeting this year was held at the Dunkeld Bowls Club in Johannesburg.



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The species accounts can be dipped into at random, but most people will probably read the book from cover to cover. Ken and Mel have made many interesting and original observations and have photographed previously unrecorded bird behaviour. This is one of the strengths of the book. The photographs that accompany the breeding records add colour and authenticity to the observations and the line drawings and colour illustrations add an artistic touch.

This book is a major contribution to our knowledge of Botswana's avifauna. It is unlikely to be superseded and will certainly become a collector's item. **PETE HANCOCK**



OBSERVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES WITH BIRDS BREEDING IN BOTSWANA

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lily lover

I photographed this male Southern Brown-throated Weaver *Ploceus xanthopterus* in Chobe, Botswana, while he was attempting to attract a female to his territory. In the throes of his busy courtship display, he landed on an open waterlily and posed there briefly.

The image was taken early in December, shortly before the floods arrive in the area, which is when the weavers begin to nest. I was watching Allen's Gallinules, moorhens and jacanas from a photographic boat in a little channel that is full of waterlilies and a perfect spot at which to photograph these species. Although one side of the channel is edged with reeds, it is not typically where one would expect to see weavers, but this male was very much in evidence, always with a female in tow. He wasn't anywhere near the reeds and seemed far more interested in displaying on the lilies, behaviour that I hadn't previously seen.

JANINE KRAYER

www.pangolinphoto.com

Canon 1D X Mark II and Canon 100–400mm Mark II lens; 1/800 sec; f5.6; ISO 500

cabinet reshuffle

At the museum I'm always digging around in this or that bird cabinet. But recent events outside the institution, to the dim extent that I'm aware of them, got me thinking of a cabinet of another kind. Imagine if South Africa's birds had come up with a cabinet in the same way that human politicians do.

Choosing a president was not quite as straightforward as you might imagine. You'd think that the national bird, the Blue Crane, would have been a shoo-in, but the Secretarybird was another candidate with strong credentials as it features in the coat of arms. The broad popular appeal of the crane won the day though. Support for the more military Secretarybird did not carry much beyond the hawks, but it did put its stamp on the position of deputy president.

Then it was down to the nitty-gritty of the individual ministerial portfolios. The Red-billed Quelea pushed hard for Agriculture and certainly had the numbers behind it. However, other quarters shied away, sensing a hidden agenda and conflict of interest in the quelea's promise to rocket grain production. The position went to a candidate from the stock-farming lobby with a lily-white record: the Western Cattle Egret. Fisheries was even more controversial. The two front-runners for minister and deputy were the African Penguin and Cape Gannet respectively. In opposition was a strong coalition of other piscivores, such as the regal pelicans, Goliath Heron (representing a particularly diverse lobby group) and even several kingfishers – all with the aristocratic African Fish Eagle as ring-leader. The president stepped in before things became too heated and pointed out that this portfolio had always been marine focused. That shut everyone up, except for a few grumbling cormorants and terns, and the penguin and gannet

were duly ensconced. By contrast, Forestry was a breeze, with all acknowledging the gravitas that the Crowned Eagle would bring to the post.

Trade and Industry looked set for some serious bargaining, as there were no obvious candidates. But when the Common Ostrich pointed out that in good years it single-handedly brought in more than R2-billion in foreign exchange to the annual economy, the matter was settled. Mining has been in a funk for a while and there was little talent evident in that department. Eventually the portfolio was abandoned to the Ground Woodpecker, to most likely just dig that hole even deeper.

Housing had happier options, with the Hamerkop and Sociable Weaver jointly taking the ministry between them by simple acclamation. Water Affairs had a wide array of dripping waterfowl to choose from. The final decision was a surprise: it went to a male sandgrouse on the basis of its unique and enterprising ability to transport water across vast distances under the most trying conditions. All agreed that Sanitation had to go to a vulture. The endemic Cape Vulture seemed the obvious choice, but typically the Lappet-faced Vulture bounded into the fray, scattering all before it, and mantled over the ministry with nobody being able to do much about it. The Peregrine Falcon stooped in to take Sport, letting its speed to do the talking. Tourism was a tough one – clearly the endemics were the biggest drawcards, but which ones in particular? Eventually the studious, head-down Southern Bald Ibis walked off as minister, with the Black Harrier harassing it as deputy.

Finance was fairly self-evident, with the Common Fiscal being appointed as minister and the Fiscal Flycatcher as deputy. There were some who felt that the cuckoos should have been considered, based on their ability to get

maximum return from minimal investment, but others questioned the integrity of their methods.

The hawks have always dominated Defence and, still smarting from their earlier rebuff, they belligerently mandated the Martial Eagle. If anyone disagreed, they wisely kept it to themselves, the gamebirds in particular. Some balance was injected by letting the doves take the Foreign Affairs portfolio. Minister of Police went to the Fork-tailed Drongo, with everyone reassured about the singular vigilance and undoubted courage inherent in this choice. All noted how even the menacing Minister of Defence made way for the drongo when it swooped up to the podium. State Security was even easier, going straight to the White-winged Flufftail on the basis of it keeping its secrets better than any other bird. The flufftail was also well versed in surreptitious surveillance techniques, such as hidden cameras and clandestine recordings. It was decided that the skills of a male hornbill during the nesting period were exactly what was required at Correctional Services, and it was obvious that the Collared Flycatcher deserved to serve time as deputy.

The most difficult ministry? Home Affairs, as always. A plethora of migrants clamoured for representation to sort out the mess, with luminaries such as the White Storks in the vanguard. This just incensed the residents, who directed their vitriol at illegal immigrants in particular. Sensing the rising xenophobia, birds like the Common Myna edged for the door, heckled by rabble-rousers such as the Grey Go-away-bird. Again it fell to the president to intervene and smooth the ruffled feathers.

And the Speaker? Well, that went to the Hadedu Ibis, mainly because no other bird could shout it down.

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